UNBOOKS CLASSICS

GOULASHFAN & OLIPHAUNTE

The Entire Affair

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To my Goddess, my light
Please don't shave your forearms

Story Credits

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A Sanguine Affair by GoulashFan
A Languid Affair by GoulashFan
A Wistful Affair by GoulashFan

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Compiled by GoulashFan, November 2026

INTRODUCTION

UNCYCLOPEDIA HAS OFTEN been unappreciated as a source of real humor and creativity in the online writing world. Understandably so, since about ninety percent of it is crap. Still, there are nuggets of genuine art hidden to everyone but a select few.

One such hidden gem is Oliphaunte's "A Pragmatic Affair", a short and sweet gag piece about an interminably horny detective named Cook. Oliphaunte practically invented the horny detective novel. At least, the idea of a detective being horny never occurred to me before reading his story.

I was inspired by Oliphaunte, and thought that Detective Cook was a perfect vehicle for fun, bawdy pulp adventures. Along the way, I grew more and more invested in exploring Cook's psyche, his interior. I was fascinated by the idea of a narrator who narrates to himself as much as he

does for the reader. It was midway when writing “A Sanguine Affair” that I realized, while I was poking fun at Cook’s ridiculous justifications and attitudes about love and sex, I was secretly indicting myself. There was a reason writing his voice came too easily to me.

This collection includes the entire Detective Cook saga, starting with Oliphaunte’s “A Pragmatic Affair”, and the three other novella-length stories I wrote, “A Sanguine Affair”, “A Languid Affair”, and “A Wistful Affair.” Hopefully, if you can stomach it, you’ll come to see the man behind the gag, the soul behind the stiffy. Someone please tell me I’m normal.

GoulashFan, 2026

Part One

A Pragmatic Affair

A PRAGMATIC AFFAIR

IT WAS A beautiful day in Old London town.

The rain was light and the sun actually shone for a few minutes before being engulfed by clouds. I sat at my desk pretending to read a newspaper while glancing at my neighbor's new wife outside my window.

She had a rack given to her by angels and had just become infatuated with the ancient game of jump rope, god bless her. Watching her made me think back to a time not too long ago, a time just like this when I had been given my very first mystery. I also realized that the 'Bouncing Betty' outside my window was far more talented with jump rope than physically possible for someone with those melon balls on their chest. "Congratulate neighbor's wife on tremendous skill and breasts, if conversation allows," I noted to myself. I was never a man to be shy about my observations of others and this was especially true

during my first mystery. I remember it as clear as day; it was a cloudy and gloomy day when the Duchess of Winchester showed up at my door. Naturally, my butler, Thomas, let her in and introduced us. She was surprisingly gorgeous; she had a body that would make Aphrodite envious and had the straightest teeth on any British girl I've seen. Even Lady Hamilton would have surrendered at the sight of this woman's beauty and immediately switched teams just for one night of pleasure with her. "Introduce Lady Hamilton and Duchess ASAP," I jotted down before turning attention to the Duchess.

It had turned out that the Duchess had come with an assignment for me. It had only been recently that I finally felt ready to leave the force to pursue a career as a private detective. I almost wept at the thought that my first case might result in the best shagging I'd ever had. I couldn't let go of the thought and had to think of strangled puppies to prevent my semi from turning into a full on. Unfortunately, the thought of sex and strangled puppies somehow aroused me even more and to give me time to put a blanket on my lap, I began to cry to avert her attention. As I sat, wiping my tears, she began to tell me that she wasn't sure if I was the best candidate to help her.

"I'm not sure you can help me."

"You must have faith madame. If there is one person who can help you, it is private detective

Cook," I said, quickly pointing to myself to ensure the Duchess that it was myself I was referring to, despite the fact there were only two of us in the room. She did not appear reassured.

"Cook? I thought your name was Sanders."

I shuddered. Sanders, my longtime arch-rival and coincidental neighbor who lived a floor above me. We met in the Force, quickly vying for position of captain and because of it, we became rivals. When I quit and became a detective, he followed suit. Perhaps my leaving the force made the job pointless for him without the sense of competition, perhaps he was just naturally a dick. Whichever the case, I knew I could not let him steal my first case from under my nose.

"Madame, I can assure you that Sanders is an incompetent detective. I can promise you that the services he provides are far more expensive and less promising than mine. Give me the case first, I promise I won't fail"

"Well... I can see no harm in giving it away to you first."

I giggled. I quickly realized my mistake.

"Wait, please do not leave so quickly madame! I was only emitting sounds of humour because of another affair that came across my mind!"

"Do not patronize me sir!" She shouted at me, "I know your kind, sick and perverted! I need someone who can actually handle their duty!"

I showed remorse, trying to restrain my

giggling at her saying ‘duty.’

“Madame, please, I apologize for that quick sign of immaturity. Please, return back to my office and tell me of your case.”

It seemed I had fooled her into believing my fake remorse. She returned, as did I, offering her tea to relax her and have her tell me her story.

“It is about my husband.”

“Oh,” I said disappointedly.

“He recently passed away.”

“Oh good,” I said, with renewed vigor and stupidity. “Oh good… grief, how unfortunate for you,” I quickly finished so as to recover from the mistake, allowing me to relax and for my testicles to re-descend. I picked up my tea.

“So, how exactly did he die?” I asked while gulping down my tea in the most apparent show of embarrassment.

“While we were having sex.”

Lucky bastard, I thought. “Lucky bastard,” I subsequently said, showing that my brain had still not recovered from its last escapade.

“I’m sorry?” The Duchess asked with a rising crescendo in her voice.

“I meant… at least he died a happy man, if not the happiest man.” Luckily, the Duchess interpreted the statement as a compliment rather than a sexual thought and relaxed.

“But the circumstances around his death are what worry me. I believe he was poisoned.”

“Indeed? What makes you think that.”

“Well, firstly, he had eaten dinner before we decided to go to bed together and was not feeling well. He was also still chewing some food while we were doing it.”

“Curious…”

“Yes. The second clue was that he was not performing his best that night. You see, my husband was hung like a wild horse and pleasured me every night when we made love. I mean, it was fantastic and grand and just perfect.”

“The sex or his penis?” I asked, for clarification and personal reasons.

“Both. But that night you see, while we were doing the Swirling Indian, he had these convulsions and was signaling something to me with his hands.”

“Could you please demonstrate?” I asked, wanting to see what he was motioning to the Duchess. She began to undress. “No, no, I meant the motions, not the Swirling Indian.” I told her, against my better judgment. I cursed my brain which had outdone itself by screwing me over a third time.

“Oh, I’m sorry. Well, the first motion was he grabbed his throat and started heaving for breath. Naturally, I thought he was trying to turn himself on even more and was trying to get into it.”

“Naturally…” I said, with a slight sardonic tone.

“Then he grabbed my hand and began to hit his back with it. At this point, I got a little worried and turned myself right-side up and pulled my leg back over my head. Then he fell over coughing while I was trying to unhook my left hand from his waist and tried to pull my other leg from the other side of my head. Then he fell over blue, and just stopped breathing. I came to help him and ask what it was he was trying to tell me, but my right hand was still stuck between his legs and my left leg was still hooked to his right leg. By the time I got out of the Swirling Indian position, he was dead.”

I quickly wrote down my notes, making sure to note the type of death the husband had undergone and also reminding myself to look up the Swirling Indian for future reference.

“Well madame, I have good news and I have bad news. The good news is, your husband does not seem to have died of poisoning, but rather, choked on his food. His motioning was him trying to get you to give the Heimlich maneuver, which you failed in every respect to do.”

“Oh, my poor husband! What is the bad news?”

“The bad news is, you are not nearly as bright as you seem. Forgive me lady, you have the looks of a goddess, but the wit of a donkey. I cannot fornicate with someone who may very well be the cause of my death in the extreme case that I

happen to choke while in their vicinity."

"Fornicate? But sir, I merely wanted to seek professional advice so that I may be relieved of this guilt! Should you not come see the body at least, just to fully determine the cause and make sure you are right?"

"I'm sorry, but I have no intention of furthering a relationship with someone like you! I especially don't want to come see your dead, naked husband. Go talk to Sanders about it, I'm sure that is right up his alley, the pervert. Good day madame!" And with that, I called for Thomas to show the Duchess out. It is against my better nature to turn away such a fine specimen, but a mind is an important part of a woman to me. No matter how beautiful a woman, if she can't tie her shoes without having to have someone recite the directions to them, I can never picture myself being with them. And so, that case had been closed, with my assumption that I was right.

I returned from day-dreaming only to look back out the window to see the neighbor's wife again. It seemed she had picked up gardening and had just tripped and spilled a bucket of water all over herself. While wearing a white, thin shirt. And blouse. And no underwear. She then laughed a bit and started to jump rope again. I began to cry. As I wept in unbelievable happiness and fortune, a man with a black hat and skeleton cane came in. I quickly arose to greet him. He asked if I

was alright. I quickly made up a story about a war injury that causes tearing at random times and apologized for crying.

“I see,” he said. “And how does that explain the enormous bulge coming from your trousers?”

I looked down. It seemed that tears were not the only thing the neighbor’s wife had left me with.

“This sir,” I said hesitantly to allow me time to think, “is not what you think it to be, oh no. This sir… is… a carrot. You see, I have two war wounds, this one involves me having to stuff a carrot down my trousers because carrots have a chemical… which… helps the wounds? Yes, that’s right it helps the wounds.”

“Well,” He replied, obviously fooled by my fake explanations, “now that it seems your carrot has subsided, I wish to hire you, for a case I have to be solved.”

And so, another mystery began…

Part Two

A Sanguine Affair

CHAPTER I

IT WAS A sweltering day in Marrakesh.

I sneaked along the winding corridors of the market streets, passing stalls full of exotic spices, touristy baubles, and even a dozen or so exotic dancers, most of them beardless. I spotted the courier out of the corner of my eye, loitering by a hole-in-the-wall teashop which smelled vaguely of mint and unwashed feet. His eyes were darting, beads of sweat were dripping from his temple, and he would occasionally say, in perfect English, “When is the hashish supplier gonna come? I’ve been waiting for like ten minutes!” His subtle tells betrayed his true loyalty: he was a foot soldier for Amine Sayed, leader of the town’s criminal underground.

I crept closer towards him, wearing the garb of his countrymen to hide among the crowd: a bejeweled kaftan in bright red, with cute little tassels at the end. Sadly, I had bought one in a

women's size, and the wolf-whistling of old Berbers almost gave away my position. I hid almost ten feet from him, behind a cage full of chameleons and macaques. A man in a brown tunic approached the courier, carrying on his back a giant bag with large Arabic text, and a little parenthetical inset at the bottom labeled "le haschisch." It took a prodigious amount of analytical deduction, but I eventually surmised that that was French for hashish. I had found him, one of Sayed's most trusted underbosses.

I crawled prone on the floor, hiding behind the legs of a gorgeous Amazigh woman, before I ninja rolled into the teashop unseen, that is, until the courier and Sayed's underboss spotted me. Using my mastery of the verbal arts, I conjured up my best alibi:

"Oh là là, I am a French woman, I just love mint tea mixed with laudanum, and killing Algerians on the beach due to my ennui and my inner anhedonia, oui oui!" Damn! I kind of went French-Canadian there at the end. Still, my deception had worked.

The two ruffian Riffians resumed their rhetorical roughhousing. One hundred francs, two hundred francs! I was appalled by their sale of contraband hash, as opposed to the wholesome hash sold by the French Protectorate. I took a long, slow draw of kif—a mixture of cannabis and local tobacco—from my pipe, and felt my nerves

calm, along with a sudden urge to subvert the nuclear family. Despite my distaste, I was not here to stop their trade, nor was I here to apprehend their master Sayed. I had travelled to the red city of Marrakesh for the same reason I usually do anything: a woman had begged me to!

Mme. Françoise Chassepot, a French noblewoman of honorable repute, was horrified to discover that her prized jewel, a necklace containing a fifty-carat diamond mined from the Atlas Mountains of Morocco, had been stolen from her estate in Brittany. The authorities suspected her husband on account of some cockamamie insurance scheme. I knew better. I knew Sayed, that dark sultan of the Marrakesh underworld, had played a hand. Some weeks prior, I was dressed like Napoleon, being led like a dog as she dangled a feather duster right by my nose. “Françoise, my sweet soubrette, how I long to smell that feather duster between your legs, if you know what I mean!” She was dressed as a humble maid, as instructed, and she blushed as she did her best impression of the lower classes. “Spit on the floor for me darling!”

“Oui oui, Détective Cook!” You can tell she was French by that accent mark on the e. “But don’t call me Françoise, my name is Josephine! Stick to the script, you stupid Englishman!”

It was only in that morning glow of day, tossed and turned like laundry among her highest thread-

count sheets, that she spoke to me of her missing diamond. Sayed, who in polite society was a mere exporter of rugs, had visited the Chassepot estate as part of a trade delegation, and Mme. Françoise insisted to me that she had not made love with that strapping Arab, whereupon her necklace was not purloined by his rough yet tender hands as they were canoodling in the tub. She was sure Sayed had grabbed it out of her purse when she wasn't looking. I believed her totally. She entrusted me with a mission to retrieve her necklace. It was hours later that same day when Monsieur Chassepot caught us in bed, and I ran naked out of that mad Frenchman's house, save for a bicorne hat.

Back in the teahouse, the underboss and the courier were deep in talk. They spoke in English, to throw off any listeners, yet their cleverness would prove to be their undoing.

"Sayed wants that giant bag of hashish, along with the jewels still in the Port of Casablanca, inside the stash site by tomorrow," said the underboss, whom the courier called Amir. "Your payment will come once the goods are safely secured."

"Remind me again, where the stash site is?" said the courier. "I forgot what the underboss had said at ze meeting earlier today." Ze meeting? My God, he wasn't a gangster at all, but an undercover Frenchman. He was police!

Amir grabbed the poor sod—who I bet was at least a quarter Algerian to account for the sporting tan—and sliced his throat right at the tea table. The surrounding men remained unfazed, drinking their mint teas with nary an interruption. I knew right away that if Amir were to escape, all hope of finding those jewels would be lost. In dramatic fashion, I shrugged off my womanly disguise to reveal a linen floral shirt, and a tasteful pair of khaki shorts, gifted to me by Sir Khaki himself.

"Amir! Stop right there in the name of the law!" Amir gave me a puzzled look, before running through the back door, out into the winding streets of the marketplaces. I pursued him, nipping at his heels as he knocked over merchant stalls or macaque cages and even slipped under a large glass pane held by two burly Arabs, which I narrowly avoided crashing into myself. I borrowed a bucking donkey, jumped atop him, and struck his backside with such ferocity that that nag ran with the speed of a cannonball. Equine and all, I crashed into Amir, right at the center of Jemaa el-Fnaa square.

Lying on the ground, I grabbed him by the scruff of his tunic, shouting, "Where are the jewels?"

"What jewels, you foolish Englishman? You mean these jewels?" Amir screamed, as he gave his fat, ugly testes a shake over his stained trousers. That's a little much, Amir.

“That’s a little much, Amir!” I said, “I don’t mean your balls, but the famed necklace of Mme. Françoise Chassepot!”

Amir spit on the ground. “That jewel belongs to our people, not some corpulent Frenchwoman!”

I shrieked in anger and punched him square in the jaw! “She’s Venusian at best, she barely qualifies as Rubenesque! You just have unhealthy standards.” I went for my most dastardly trick. I threw some sand in his eyes.

“Aaaahhh! There’s sand in my eyes!” screamed Amir.

“Tell me now, or there’ll be more where that came from, a Sahara’s worth!”

“La Babounia, the Frenchy hotel, room 371!” he said. Drawn by the commotion, a cavalcade of French Protectorate police, the ones with the silly hats, swarmed around us. Amir panicked, he ran up to the Frenchies and brandished a spork aimed right at them. “Amir, no!” I screamed, I knew right away that that spork would be his doom.

“Arrêtez! Arrêtez!” the Frenchy pigs screamed before killing Amir in a hail of revolver fire. Amid the smoke, I made my escape, lest I be apprehended by the local Frenchies and turned into their resident buttboy. I learned that lesson the hard way in Soltau. As I ran, I saw the silhouette of a certain Commissaire Merkin, Chief of Police, waving his fists and screaming, “Cook! Come back here!” in his ridiculous accent.

It was all in a day's work for yours truly. I retired to a scrappy little foundouk (a sort of Moroccan inn) at the edge of town, right by the walls of Old Marrakesh. It was no La Babounia, but the pleasures here were greater than any pastries or scandalized housekeepers you could find at that sterile French mill. Out in the courtyard balcony, Fatima stood on the second level, leaning so sensually by the railings. She was wearing the headdress of her people, draped in coin-shaped jewels, and even from afar I could smell the scent of her jasmine-scented skin, and the brief whiff of myrrh carried by the desert wind. After the tragedy at the square, I needed her embrace more than ever.

Fatima crooned, "Oh, my Pale King, my English rose, but in a manly way, let me soothe your aches!"

"My queen, my caramel Caliphess, let me be buried in the warmth of your tattooed arms!" I said. "Just a note, no need to call me pale. It's a bit too Eldritch for my tastes."

I ran to her like a moth would run to another moth. Frantically, we shambled to the door of my humble room, collapsing into a bed made of lumpy straw and canvas. I couldn't care less with my Fatima! I gave her a battering of kisses, from her lips, down to those gorgeous orbs, and finally to those thick thighs, covered only by a layer of sheer silk fabric. I tore those khaki shorts from my

body as if a vise, the fires of my passion surging from the look of those black, dulcet eyes, which held no malintent or duplicitous motive. You could see every curve of her in the afternoon sun, the aroma of her sweat rising gingerly from those jasmine vapors. Oh, God, what a night! I reveled in the sight of her beneath me, and then atop me, and then astride me, as if I held the answer to each of her coy little questions. Oh let me drown in the steamy forest of her nethers, smelling of cinnamon and honey! AHHHHH!!!!!!

CHAPTER II

I AWOKE TO the sound of distant men's prayers.

The morning call to prayer stirred me awake. I imagined they were praying for the briefest of rains, or maybe a good pot roast. I was still spooning my lover, the morning light now casting Fatima—hair tousled by the madness of our lovemaking—in a blanket of ember light, like the marble curves of some Roman goddess, but with arms and legs and a really sexy head. "Fatima," I crooned. "My love, I must depart. I have a whole day of detective work ahead. But I will be back, rest assured."

Still half asleep, Fatima said, "Oh, how I wish the Sun would move faster, so the time between our ministrations would be hastened!" Kissing her sweetly on the forehead, and adoring her naïve assumptions of astronomy and time, I departed, but not before I reminded her to bring the olive oil

for tonight. The extra-virgin type, ironically enough.

Fatima had just about fallen into my arms the second I stepped off the train into Marrakesh. Right away, she was fixated on me, on my detective work, my tryst with Mme. Chassepot (I don't know if Françoise is into that girl-on-girl stuff, but I made a mental note to politely ask), and the state of my investigation into her missing diamond. To love others is one thing, to be merely tolerated for your Dionysian Sex God skills is another, but to be truly and unashamedly wanted: that was the thing that drove me the most. Beyond the resolution of a case well-solved, or the satisfaction of watching a puzzle reveal itself to be a sailboat, to be wanted, to be needed, that was the furtive fuel for my heart's innermost desires.

Sadly, I had to return to the task at hand: La Babounia, the Frenchy hotel, room 371. The location of the stash. La Babounia had become a top destination for the nobility of all of Europe to gorge on acrid French wine and even acrider French pigs, along with those little pastries with the tiny plates, rather than large honest English ones. I was informed that the spas were top-rate, although the soaps were a little harsh on the skin. I made my way to the hotel lobby, whose interior design was a garish mishmash of Moroccan styles and French Nouveau. That gaudy chandelier was doing the room no favors. I walked up to the front

desk where the receptionist, a cute gamine in a maroon uniform, was taking calls.

"Detective Cook, Attorney at—shit, I mean, I'm Cook. John Cook. Private Detective."

"You wish to stay in ze hotel, no?" she said.

"Not for long, I'm afraid. I need to inspect one of your hotel rooms, 3-7-1 to be precise. There may be foul motion in play. Or foul play in motion? Either one."

"You are not a member of law enforcement, no?" she said in that halting French way which sounds vaguely pig-like in men yet adorable in women, "To access the room, we will need to contact ze police to ensure you are working as an official liaison. Otherwise, we cannot allow you access."

I could seduce the receptionist, but she was the gamine type, with the wide doe eyes and the quiet ruefulness about the world behind the pleasant exterior. These girls preferred the slow burn over the overt conflagration: I'd need to spend two, three months minimum, establishing myself as the brooding, slightly older man (perhaps a journalist), wherein she would teach me to be open to new possibilities, and I would build in her a quiet confidence to become the woman she'd always wanted to be, and only then could we possibly make love (a 50/50 coin flip), allowing me access to room 371. That would take far too long! And my heart would break at the end, as

circumstances drove us away from ever truly being together, and I'd be left with nothing but a locket, or a postcard, or even just a memory, to process my understated grief.

"Sir? Are you alright? You've been staring at the wall for thirty seconds," said the receptionist.

"Oh, my bad! I must depart!" I said, as I sprinted towards the laundry room. I ran past a procession of housekeeping staff, ironing sheets and carrying baskets of dirty Frenchmen's laundry. There was sure to be an open locker, or a shelf of some kind, where the housekeeping kept their tight little uniforms. Anyone could spot a fake bellhop, but a fake housekeeper? It was novel, and it was daring. I found a uniform my size, some kind of short white cassock paired with a fez hat. I went back to the lobby, with no one the wiser.

It was there that I saw Commissaire Merkin, along with a cadre of Moroccan policemen, bursting through the front door, asking the ingénue at the front desk about me. I walked the other way, into the spa rooms with the terribly uneven zellige tiles. Hiding in a storage closet, I heard the faint sound of Merkin screaming, "Find Detective Cook, find the meddler!" They were sure to be curious about what I had said to Amir, but I wasn't about to start trusting the local police. Lowering my gaze, I made a steady beeline towards the stairs, up to room 371, where Mme. Chassepot's necklace and that giant bag of hash

were likely stashed. I walked up to the room labeled 371. “Room service, hon hon!” I said.

Hearing no answer, I opened the door to what was a palatial suite. It was partly interior, with an open ceiling at the center which formed a kind of miniature courtyard. From outside the windows, you could see the walls of Old Marrakesh, the red brick minarets soaring into the cloudless sky, date palms swaying in the hot air, and the distant outlines of the Atlas Mountains.

“It is beautiful, yes?” said a female voice from behind. It was Fatima, dressed more plainly than in her usual exotic negligee. “This is my home, the way London is yours.”

“I’m in the middle of work, darling! But as soon as I find Françoise’s necklace, we can proceed to make wild, passionate love! In a real bed, not that straw cart with the donkey caca.”

“Oh, my sweet English rose,” she said with a touch of sadness. She slithered forward, and planted the lightest of kisses on my lips, lighting a fire in my tenderloins. To my shock, she brought out the necklace, which shone resplendent when held in her hands.

“This was not altogether unexpected, yet still, deeply tragic,” I said, although I was lying. I was completely shocked! Who could’ve seen this coming? “Did I really rule your passions, or was I just another target?”

“The lovemaking was real, but yes, I work for

Sayed! He's not the crime lord you think he is, he wants real change!"

I was mortified to hear that. An opinion? On the other hand, the slight guilt I had felt from foisting the full intensity of my white-hot lust upon her was gone: she was a woman, in full! With motivations and beliefs and everything! Another aspect of the divine feminine (of which betrayal was a part), that men can only partially reach through the art of lovemaking, and each woman in turn was a facet of that goddess, another glimpse into a realm where want and need were not, where the soul was truly fed from the mirthful nectars of her divine quim. And I'm sure every woman was also exploring that divine masculine, which symbolized beard oil and rye whiskey or whatever. At least, that's what I tell myself whenever some frigid reprobate calls me a pussyhound!

Her kiss must've been laced with poison. I slipped casually into a deeper and deeper slumber, watching as the last of my sight faded. Now I could only see the face of my lover, looking down at me with real sorrow.

"I must tell you before you're gone forever. My real name is Dihya. Goodbye, my love." I had no Earthly idea what the significance of that was. My Dihya? Eh, I can make it work. God she's hot!

CHAPTER III

THERE HE WAS: Amine Sayed.

It had been three hours since I was dragged into his compound, hidden in the underground khettaras just outside Marrakesh proper. He was shorter than I had anticipated, based purely on the rapturous praise Mme. Chassepot had sung in his honor. He wore the three-piece suit of a gentleman dandy, and the beadiness in his eyes betrayed a slight annoyance with anything and everything, as if your very presence was an offense to the natural order.

"You are a hard man to find, Mr. Cook."

"You found me easily enough," I said with some bitterness. "What's the plan now? Kill me? Torture me with snakes? Elephants? Wait, no, that's an Indian thing... camels?"

"Camels? No, no, just regular torture."

In my academy days, I attended a seminar by a certain Dutch analyst, Kiki Kriegsmesser, about the

best way to endure torture in the event you were captured. His main strategy was to keep continuously shitting yourself until the smell became unbearable, so that your captors would have to set you free. Sadly, my bowels were completely empty, on account of an especially searing dish of lamb boiled in a spiced tomato sauce. I cursed the expeditiousness of my bowels. The lamb, however, was perfectly tender.

"I couldn't care less about your provincial criminal dealings, Sayed, I'm only here for the necklace. I have a client in Brest who says you stole it, and is demanding its return!"

"Do you know why I stole the necklace from that slightly Venusian, but not at all fat, Frenchwoman?"

I remembered how fondly Fatima, no, Dihya, spoke of her home, in the pillow talk after those glorious bouts where we'd leave each other spent and aching. She'd prattle on about "resistance" and the dream of a dead republic and it would go in one ear and out the other, since it seemed all very heady and complicated, and I'd instead focus on the sound of her voice and the shape of her lips. To be honest, I'd never put much thought into the whole Empire business. I was none too fond of those slightly bulbous pith helmets, or those opulent mustaches which got in the way of cunnilingus. Still, using my advanced skills of deduction and applying them to the field of

geopolitics, I suspected that the locals were not overly fond of their French overlords, but I hesitated to say much else.

"Uh, some kind of anti-colonial nativist statement about the need to return the stolen capital of the dispossessed?" I said, doing my best impression of a raving Communist. This was a very helpful skill in wooing long-legged socialists, or ethereal bisexuals.

Sayed said coldly, "Don't be ridiculous. I stole it for the money."

From the shadows, the face of a familiar Commissaire emerged: Merkin! He was smirkin', and carrying the same knife that Amir had used to kill that poor Frenchy. He wore a smug grin, and a pencil-thin mustache twirled in the shape of an ampersand. He gave Sayed a quick, bonhomie hug, followed by the two puckering sounds of la bise, a sort of French greeting for perverts.

Two guards brought Dihya out in chains, with an oily rag covering her mouth. My love! She was alive, yet clearly bruised, and not in a good way.

"It's true, she delivered you to me. I told her it was necessary to defend her people. This whole organization, they believe we're fighting the good fight. I used to think in those terms as well, back when I still had Anarcho-Communo-Illegalist sympathies studying at the Sorbonne, where I send all my most ardent acolytes. You see, our struggle predates the conquest of 1907. Consider the

ethnolinguistic diversity of the…" and I drifted in and out of sleep as he lectured on about his exact political motivations and political valences, which interfaced perfectly with the region in a way which made sense to anybody in the know about world history, "… an identity founded on the maintenance of a monarchical dynasty, which would, even without European patronage, descend into sectarian…" and on and on he went, "… a deception, necessary to keep the peace for when the real…" still he continued, "… a pact of convenience with the current…" and more, "… transcend divide and conquer, the Berber and Arab a distraction from global commun…" and still, despite it all, some more, "… and that is why we exist as a criminal organization!"

"Can you give me the short version?" I asked. Sayed frowned.

"Okay, I'll go real slow. I make money doing illegal crime stuff, and I tell everyone I employ it's for a greater cause, but really, it's so I can make a lot of money."

"Oui, oui! The cause was a fake, designed to funnel real rebellion into a false one we could control!" Merkin said expositorily.

Sayed corrected him slightly, "That's kind of the gist, but really, when you look at the…" and he went on for another fifty minutes, until I interrupted him.

"Can you skip to the part where you tell me

what happens to Dihya?"

"Oh, yes, her. She was supposed to kill you, and any other detective who went sniffing for the jewels." Sayed took the necklace out from a pocket in his waistcoat, letting the fifty-carat diamond shine for all to see. "Sadly for her, she chose to keep you alive despite my specific instructions. I don't tolerate disloyalty, even if she did make the right choice in the end. God only knows what she was doing with you all those days."

"Oh, yes, we spent most of our time together making wild, passionate love."

"Really? You? I don't see the appeal," said Sayed. "Anyway, we were going to kill you right away, but a private detective has many clients, yes? Much information, useful for blackmail, I suppose?"

"I'd have to agree. It's the smart thing to do," I said. "Plenty of blackmail, it'd take many days to pry it all out of me." That fool! I would escape long before then. But still, I could flatter him into a false sense of security. Better than what I had to do at Soltau. The Germans never washed their bottoms. Sayed whistled to a man clad in an executioner's hood.

"Take him to the dungeon! Show him what his life will be like for the next four weeks or so!" Four whole weeks to plan an escape? This was trivial, child's play, perhaps only slightly complicated by my pressing need to rescue Dihya

as well. I'd give her a right talking-to about her betrayal, I'd smack her in the rear as she apologized for sending me to my uncertain doom. And then of course, she could punish me right back. Yes, in a week's time, I would be back in Dihya's arms, and I would return that jewel to Mme. Chassepot, and then she and Françoise would work out whether they were into that girl-on-girl stuff. The future was looking bright for old Cook!

The executioner nudged me almost paternally as he led me to my cell. "Don't worry about the four weeks of torture thing, we're going to kill you in an hour."

"What?" I said, the shock of his words not quite registering.

"I was talking to my therapist about my job. I told her, I felt terrible clobbering people to death with rusty hacksaws. And she said, 'You may not have control over what your job is, there'll always be torturers after all, but you have control over how your job is.' So, we'll put you in the cell, come back in an hour, slice your head off right away, quick. Painless. Then, we'll knock your body around a little bit, and then I'll tell Sayed you died. Cheer up, friend, it'll be over soon."

An hour? What luck. A detective does his best work when the inner machinations of his mind can salivate for hours, or even weeks. An hour is no time at all, you can't even solve a riddle in an

hour. The kindly executioner took me by the hand, and gently pushed me into the cell, where to my deepest shock, I saw an old enemy there: Sanders!?

CHAPTER IV

GEORGE ENIOLA SANDERS, my erstwhile friend, now enemy.

For a brief spell, we were even neighbors. He kept me up incessantly with the sound of his punching; he had an old leather bag placed against a dimly lit corner that he'd hit whenever he felt the need to work out his inner turmoil. For a while, we were rivals in the force, jockeying for the position of captain, which in hindsight was absurd, as we had both scarcely made constable. He always had a chip on his shoulder, perhaps from being the only man of Nigerian descent in the force, or from me constantly bringing that up to him. I wasn't being racist: I simply wanted to know more about Nigeria. I had always suspected he had followed me into the private world, setting up his own rival practice to spite me, or out of a simple lack of imagination. But now he was sitting grimly on a little stool, scowling at the wall. He

was wearing a grimy tweed overcoat and a tie, clothes not fit for an outing in the desert.

"Sanders? What are you doing here?"

Sanders replied tersely, his eyes still fixed on the wall, "Quiet, Cook. I'm ruminating." He had a gruff, working-class grit about him in his voice, which women found eminently appealing, for reasons which escape me.

He spent another minute or so transfixed in silence, before he shrugged. "Nah, mate, I've got nothing. I guess we'll just die here," he brooded.

"I don't suppose you'll tell me why you're here? Before that overly-therapized Mohammedan slices our heads off?"

He stared again at the wall, as if it represented a long-lost Lenore or his dead brother or whatever else he was stewing in. "Might as well. On account of our old friendship."

"Bah! We were friends for hardly a fortnight before your ambition curdled your humor."

He ignored my interjection. "My old boss at Scotland Yard, DCI Molton, had sent me on a mission to take Sayed down. He was operating a nexus of human trafficking out of East London. They discovered a shipping container full of dead Chinamen, stuffed to the gills with bagged heroin. Especially strange, since you can buy heroin off the shelf at Harrods."

"Okay, but how'd you get here?"

Sanders rubbed the slightly greying hairs of his

stubbly beard. “A woman, who I thought saw past my darkness. She had a darkness of her own. We had an understanding. I thought she was a spark of light against the cold, cold void of my soul. But she screwed me over, and when I came to, I was here.”

“I don’t suppose her name was Fatima?” I asked.

“Oh, you bloody bastard!” Sanders hopped from his stool, a few mini bottles of vodka spilling out of his overcoat, and he tried to sock me with punches, which I effortlessly dodged on account of my thugjitsu. “You stupid pussyhound, you bloody man-whore!”

After he calmed down, he went on another tirade: “Ever since you solved that Duchess case, you got a little bit of success, and you used it to whore yourself out in your job, and whore yourself out to whatever wench or degenerate bats her eyelids at you. Your stupid, fucking Rabelaisian appetites, you should’ve stayed a closeted pervert!”

Pervert? “What’s wrong with feeling wanted, and to want in return? Is life meant just for punching holes in the wall and scowling grimly at the sky? You scoundrel! So what if she had her way with both of us, don’t we all have a right to feel love?”

“Mate, that’s not love, that’s a void in your soul you’re trying to fill.”

“Oh, you nun!” I retorted. “And not the hot kind!”

There was no winning or losing with Sanders. His brooding was a kind of vacuum which sucked the life out of anything in a room, and I could scarcely wait for that hour to conclude so I could be killed and therefore freed from his interminable souciance. Oh the universe is cruel, the sky is falling, God is dead! Bah humbug! There is life out there!

“Do you know what I loved about Dihya? By the way, that’s her real name, she shared it with me.”

“Her tits?”

“Close, but no. Let me step back a little: any gentleman worth his salt can appreciate both a Rubenesque type, and the lithe slenderness of an agoraphobic poetess, but have you ever sunk your hands into a woman who seems soft, but under her tenderness you feel the real firmness of muscle? The kind you might see in an athlete, or one of those weightlifting shepherdesses? When I wrapped my arms around her thighs, the softness of her flesh gave way to this firmness underneath, as if her legs were like coiled anacondas, and her glutes were like the springing maw of some powerful engine. Just from the shape of it, you can tell she was really into leg kickbacks. That softness, giving way to that firmness. If you’ve ever felt it, you can never forget it.” Oh God, I can

scarcely think just recalling it!

"Your point being?"

"There's no need for a point. I just think it's neat." We were minutes from our deaths at the hands of that therapy goon, and it wasn't as if they'd be foolish enough to leave the door of our cell unlocked. I gave that door a quick tug to confirm my hopelessness, only to find it opening out into the hallway. I looked at Sanders, and he looked at me, and we forged a wordless truce from out of that weary look, right as we made our escape. Anacondas, oh, anacondas. Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted the kindly executioner, carrying an incredibly small and rusty hacksaw: he was shocked to see not two detectives, but an empty cell, save for that stupid cassock and fez. He screamed as he chased us down the hallway.

CHAPTER V

THAT OVERLY-THERAPIZED MOHAMMEDAN was screeching almost incoherently.

I tried to reason with him, saying, “You don’t have to hurt us, violence is a choice!”

He retorted, “It’s really shitty what you did just now, shaming me for something that’s outside of my control! I’m just making the same choices and compromises everyone else does!” I had no Earthly clue how he thought he could kill us painlessly with that tiny hacksaw.

“I’m reasonably sure that not killing us with a hacksaw is perfectly within your control!” He was seven feet tall, wearing a kind of makeshift leather armor, with fists the size of bowling balls. I tried to run, but Sanders grabbed me by the collar of my now stinky linen shirt. He said rather gruffly, “We’re gonna fight this guy.”

“C’mon, motherfucker!” Sanders screamed, as he readied his fists. Sanders looked straight at that

therapy goon. “Are you a man, or are you a little bitch?”

With tears in his eyes, the therapy goon went into an inarticulate rage. Sanders hit him with an uppercut which bounced harmlessly off the goon’s chiseled jaw. He hit him again, this time right by the liver, and the goon lurched in pain. He retaliated with his own uppercut, sending Sanders flying, and left him lying on the ground. Sanders spat a tooth out, the same tooth I’m pretty sure I’ve seen him spit out at least twenty-four times. How many teeth does he have? Grinning and bloody, Sanders grabbed a convenient rock and hit the goon straight in the eye with it, in an almost perfect throw. Little-known fact, Sanders was the Yard’s resident Stone Put champion for a spell.

The goon collapsed on the ground. He tried to get up, and Sanders goaded him on, “C’mon, get up! Fight like you’re not a whiny bitch!” I put a stop to these machinations immediately, and gave that reclining goon a thugjitsu thump in the head. That should keep him unconscious for at least an hour. “Let’s go before he awakes!” I yelled.

We ran through carved stone tunnels, onto a series of ladders and hidden passages leading us to the surface: we were still in Marrakesh, in a building called “Sayed’s Rug Emporium.” Where was Dihya? We were in a warehouse full of rugs and crates and exotic thingamajigs, the whole place seemed empty of people; even an evil lair

can suffer from budget cuts. That's when I heard it, a woman's scream, and not the good kind! Dihya! Sanders and I ran up a set of stairs, up the catwalks which led to a foreman's office. I swung the door open and saw Dihya, being tortured by Sayed with an ostrich feather duster. Those have surprisingly sharp bristles!

Sayed ignored us. "How many more idiot detectives did you spill our secrets to?" he said. Dihya was strung up in chains by the hands to a bar in the ceiling, Sayed was poking at her gorgeous midriff with that cruel duster.

"Unhand her, you fiend!" I said, with some authority. Sayed turned to face me, sneering, "Ah, yes, the loverboys, do you think you can—ack!"

Dihya wrapped her ample, powerful legs around Sayed's neck, and he struggled to breathe as she applied pressure from those machine-like glutes. Turning your back on a woman tied to a ceiling: a bush-league mistake for a villain. Sayed wavered in and out of consciousness, letting out a few tiny gasps as his eyes bulged and the veins in his eyes burst. Never have I been more jealous of a man. With a sickening crunch, Dihya snapped his neck with those steel thighs of hers, and Sayed fell lifelessly onto the hard floor. I helped her down to the ground, and removed those awful manacles from her hands.

"Oh, my sweet princess, my beautiful man-killing queen!" I said tenderly. Dihya looked at me

with such relief, and her doe-like eyes welled with tears. Sanders was not impressed. He held a grudge.

"Oi! Step away from her, I'm gonna make an arrest." Dihya backed into one corner. "Cook? Get the fuck away from her. Stay in your corner!" I had an almost Pavlovian response, and I stepped back, mentally preparing myself for Chassepot's lash.

"You and me need to have a talk," Sanders said. "I confided in you, I told you that Sayed was just a criminal, I told you that your stupid anarcho-communo-bullshit rebellion was just a front for his evil, and you still delivered us to him."

Dihya's face hardened, her eyes narrowed and her expression cooled. "I had known Sayed for years, I was nineteen when he found me. Why would you expect me to trust you after a couple days, especially after your French friends killed Amir? He was a brother to me," she said.

"Those frogs aren't my fucking friends, and your sob story doesn't move me. You can explain your side when you're in custody. We don't do pardons in the Yard."

"And what jurisdiction does London have over here? You have no power, your mission is complete, Sayed is gone," she said, pointing to the lifeless man in the corner. Already, his eyes were starting to glaze over, probably in bliss. Dihya

edged closer, circling Sanders and running her fingers over his admittedly well-built arms and back. “All your anger, all your strength, and nothing to use it on. Does that make you feel weak? Does that make you feel insignificant? That no matter how hard you try, no matter how many lives you save, it won’t change what’s been done to you? It won’t bring any of them back.”

Sanders scowled, but you could tell he was growing weaker. “Your words mean nothing, Fatima. Or Dihya. Or whatever bullshit name you give us next.”

Dihya pressed her ear against Sanders’—again, admittedly broad—chest, running her soft fingers through the texture of his gray overcoat. “There’s so much pain inside you, I know you want to weep. I know you want to lash out and hurt people. When they killed Amir, I lashed out too. I wanted to hurt you, I was blind to my rage.” Then, she looked up, her eyes shedding a single, ornate tear as Sanders’ face softened just a trifle.

Oh my God, that’s how they flirt! “Are you flirting right now?” I asked.

Sanders shouted, “You bloody idiot! I am conducting an interrogation of a high-value target!” He blushed a little.

Dihya slunk from under Sanders’ weathered gaze and jumped right into my arms. “My beautiful English Knight, I was worried sick over you! I’m sorry, I acted so rashly, but I was blinded

by my sorrow—" and I stopped her adorable prattling with a kiss, and I embraced her even deeper, wanting to feel the fullness of her mouth against mine. My heart fluttered as her tongue explored mine, and I felt a fire rushing into my loins as she gingerly bit my lower lip. She smiled, and did that little laugh of hers which could melt the sun itself.

Sanders erupted, verbally I mean: "What the fuck are you doing? We were having a serious conversation!"

Dihya laughed, "I was just greeting an old friend!" I had known her for maybe two weeks, but it was as if she had been by my side for years.

Sanders paced around the floor, mad, as Dihya and I were eating face. Finally, he put his foot down. "I'm gonna ask this just once. Why the fuck did you ever sleep with this buffoon?"

Dihya stepped back from me, and her face changed, neither harsh and cold like with Sanders, nor warm and doe-eyed like with me. She looked almost peaceful.

"When Amine told me to kill the two of you, I was fully ready to. But when I saw Cook showing me his little room at the edge of town, how he was filled with such nervousness and panic and how his boyishly handsome face would redden when I just leaned towards him, how he covered it all with this buffoonery and charm and devotion, I wanted to try him, and if this was all just a cover,

I could always kill him after!" I nodded along, pretty reasonable, I thought. "But when I gave a little, he gave so much back, he knew when to be gentle, when to be rough, when to push, when to pull, he was so patient, and stupidly kind, and pliant, and he never demanded, never controlled, he wanted one thing from me when everyone else wanted everything. It was a fantasy, yes, but it felt so real."

I didn't quite know what she meant, but I did know she loved me in her way.

Sanders' voice softened, "Dihya, that's not love. Cook's an idiotic pussyhound. He was a closeted pervert, and now he's a leaking pervert! Giving pleasure, taking pleasure, it's just an urge to him, you're just the thing he uses." Sanders placed his arms around her. "All you were ever taught was to give your body, and the nicest version of that is still hollow, it's still nothing."

"You know why I loved you, Sanders?" I imagined it was because of his broad forearms. "You were the opposite. You were so hard and unyielding, you gave away nothing, and you had so much strength in you. I was scared, and entranced by your violence, the way you meted it out on others, the way you'd say over and over, 'That's what they deserved,' and there was a part of me hoping and not hoping, would you use it on me? But when I broke through that surface, you weren't unyielding anymore. You yielded, oh God,

how you yielded."

I shuddered at the idea of Sanders yielding, in a feeling I hoped was revulsion and not arousal.

"And you know why I loved you, Sayed?" Dihya said, stooping down to graze his cold cheeks. "I was aimless before I met you. I didn't know the power I possessed, until you showed me what I could do, and who I could be. You were like the father I never had."

Sanders interjected, "So this was a platonic, mentor-type relation—"

"Oh, no, I slept with him too."

Sanders winced. "I feel for you, but you've got a pretty fucked up idea of love, which, by definition, excludes being a two-timing trollop!"

Dihya crossed her arms and shot Sanders a disparaging look. "I love many people because I see a part of what I love in each and every one of them. To stay with one lover at any given time would be to limit what I can feel in my heart! That is the death of love!"

"What a load of foppish, continental, candy-ass bullshit! Love is something you give, mind, body and soul! It's not a check you can split with the table! I know you blame me for what happened to your brother Amir—"

"My brother-in-arms, not literally—"

"Oh, God. Don't tell me."

"Yes. Why does it matter—"

"Jesus Christ, woman!" Sanders yelled. "Did

you sleep with all of Marrakesh?”

CHAPTER VI

OH, SHIT, I forgot about the diamond necklace!

"The necklace!" I looked through Sayed's many pockets, but I found nothing, save for a ticket to a play by Balzac (hehe). "Dihya, my love, do you know where the necklace is?"

She looked up at the ceiling and shrugged, "I don't know. Last I heard, they found a buyer for it, a pair of shifty Moldovans. Merkin would be there personally, a necklace with a diamond that size is worth a fortune."

That dastardly Frenchman. Sanders butted in, "If we don't find Merkin, he'll just find another man to run this operation, and we're back to square one."

"If we don't find Merkin and the necklace, I won't get paid!" I added. "Do you know when and where this deal is taking place?"

"Information was compartmentalized, Sayed

knew, and…" she gestured at the dead Sayed, his eyes open and now milky white. Again, what a way to die! "All I heard was, they would meet 'surrounded by cacti'."

Sanders frowned, "Cacti? That narrows it down to a sizeable chunk of North Africa. It's been hours since he left, he could be many miles from here." In frustration, Sanders punched a wall, and yelped in pain.

The foreman's office was on the second floor of Sayed's Rug Emporium, I looked out the window and noticed a particular date palm swaying in the breeze. So much water for one plant, especially in a desert. Water. Suddenly, I felt something unlock in my brain. I used my advanced analytical skills of deduction, reduction, subtraction, addition and manumission. I constructed a Mind Palace, inside a clockwork tower, inside a library with every book that could ever be written, but only in Spanish. My brain was now operating at 100%.

"My love, are you alright?" asked Dihya. "Are you constipated?"

"No, no, darling. I know exactly where the meet will take place."

Sanders said, in a rather whiny, putrescent way, "And how exactly do you know where the meeting will be?"

I explained it, to perfection: "Merkin is a Frenchman, and he's particular about his tiny, thin mustache. A Frenchman may tolerate the heat, but

not for long, so perhaps a meeting near water. On the other hand, Merkin is also a police chief, which makes him deeply impatient; when paired with his Frenchness, it's unlikely he'll be outside the city proper. Perhaps a meeting close to the emporium? Not necessarily, you see, Merkin will retire to the police headquarters after, and he could scarcely make the trip after trying to smooth over such a valuable deal. He'll be lazy. French, police chief, vain mustache. It's a location near the police station."

"There's a dozen buildings next to it!" said Sanders, as if he were a baby.

"Yes, but only one with water, and cacti! A whole garden of them!"

"The Jardin Moutarde. Cook, you're a genius!" she said, pelting my face with kisses. It was nice to be appreciated for my mind, and not just my body.

"Well, I was guessing the police station itself, invite the Moldovans there, no need to travel at all," said Sanders. "What say you, Detective Cook?"

"They're Moldovans. They'd think it's a scheme to trap them, not necessarily because they're Moldovan, although that helps. Additionally, these are French colonial police, very stupid and very lazy, easily bribable. Merkin doesn't want any more exposure than he needs."

Sanders shrugged, it was a better guess than nothing at all. Sanders and I got ready to set off,

and he finally shed that overcoat to reveal a slightly too-tight grey long-sleeve button-down, spotted with his blood. Dihya swooned at Sanders' crass display of understated masculinity. I masked my jealousy well enough, I could be gruff like Sanders, if I spent half the day eating chicken breast and chalky milkshakes. I asked Dihya to come along, but she declined.

"With Sayed gone, Merkin will want all trace of his conspiracy destroyed. I must warn my friends before the police find them!" With an ache in my heart, I watched Dihya climb out from the window, doing some sexy as fuck parkour moves on account of her being a hot assassin, instead of just taking the stairs. Wouldn't that be faster?

Sanders disapproved. With the way he operated, I know he'd put a ninety-three-year-old granny in manacles for the crime of littering, but time was of the essence. We had to get to the meet soon, or else Merkin, and the diamond, would be gone forever.

CHAPTER VII

THE JARDIN MOUTARDE was a sanctuary from the desert heat.

It was a veritable oasis, a garden of swaying date and coconut palms, succulents, a whole bamboo forest, and an assortment of cacti from all around the world, threaded by red cement paths and interrupted occasionally by a pergola or a water feature built with colorful tile. The gardens were shadowed by a small villa, looking vaguely French and cubist, colored an eye-piercing blue with yellow accents. It was a touch cooler than the streets outside the garden, which was catnip for a man as lazy and as undignified as Commissaire Merkin. He wouldn't have a whole squad of Frenchy pigs around him, perhaps two trusted confidants, maybe a scout walking a perimeter to check for any hostiles, or bumbling detectives.

Sanders and I disguised ourselves as tourists, which meant we wore shades, on top of our

regular clothes. “I love being a tourist,” I said to no one in particular.

“Shut it, Cook! Wait for the Moldovans to show.”

We sat at a lovely cedar bench, reading the latest in Marrakesh news from a paper called Le Petit Mort. A string of robberies from a group of Anarcho-Illegalists, what to do if your Arab housekeeper wants a raise, ten ways to reduce cellulite. “A little bit of cellulite is a good thing, it’s like the sprinkles on a plump woman’s rear.”

“Enough of your performative horniness. The Moldovans are here!” Sanders spotted them, you could tell they were Moldovan by the fact that they were neither French, British nor Moroccan. Sadly, these were the menacing kind of Moldovan, the kind with a big scar running through one of their eyes, not the ones in the embroidered dresses and flowers in their hair. You know, my first crush was a girl from Kishinev. They wore ill-fitting suits, and carried suitcases full of what I hoped were big wads of cash. The leader of the four was bald, save for a tuft of hair under his lower lip, the type the ruffian class call a “patch of soul.” Commissaire Merkin appeared soon after, flanked by two burly men in yellow merino wool. A little daring, if I might say.

They spoke right under the shade of a whole wall of cacti, next to a small, shallow pool. Our bench was about twenty feet from their location,

hidden by a pair of potted plants we gracefully dragged to their new location.

"You have the necklace?" said the Bald Moldovan. Merkin pulled out a little tie-string bag from his pocket. The Bald Moldovan reached for the bag, but Merkin backed away slyly.

"First, the payment." The Moldovans opened their suitcases, revealing four cashier's checks. "Hmm... impressive," said Merkin.

Sanders whispered, "I'm going to circle around, confront Merkin, and you flank him from behind."

The Bald Moldovan continued, "I hear one of your cops was killed by your friend's organization."

Merkin answered, "A trifle, a Chief Inspector was running an operation without my know-how, the man was one of his. He has since been... shall we say... buried in a shallow grave just outside town."

"And your friend? Sayed? Last I heard he was strangled to death in his own warehouse."

"A partnership of convenience, there will be others," Merkin said, hiding a tear. "Your payment looks sound." He produced the bag with the necklace inside it, and handed it over to the bald man.

Delicately, he took the necklace out, and inspected each facet of its brilliant diamond. It was a gorgeous fifty-carat centerpiece, roughly the

size of a large thumb. He gave it a lick, “Eh, good enough.”

“A pleasure doing business with you!” said Merkin. I had to act right away before that Bald Moldovan sullied that gem further with his probing tongue.

Already, Sanders was sneaking around the gardens, hoping to flank Merkin and his Moldovan buyers. In his usual fashion, Sanders sprang out from a bush wielding a Webley revolver and his old Metro police badge, “Commissaire Merkin, Freeze! You’re under a citizen’s arrest for criminal conspiracy!”

Merkin and the Moldovans froze. “And who is this tête de cul supposed to be?” said Merkin.

“Detective Constable Sanders, London Metropolitan Police Force.” He quietly appended a little “former” under his breath, for legal reasons.

Merkin shook his head in puzzlement. “And how exactly do you expect to apprehend me, Detective Constable Sanders?”

“Well, you drop your guns, you place your hands on your head, and I hogtie the lot of you.”

“You have an arrest warrant? Or jurisdiction?” said Merkin. The Moldovans reached for their own heat before Sanders screamed to put their hands up.

“I have a letter directly from the ICPC, deputizing me to take down Amine Sayed, and all known criminal conspirators!”

“You expect to arrest me, the Chief of Police of Marrakesh, with a letter?” said Merkin. “I’m supposed to take your word this is a legitimate order? You have it on you?”

“Of course I have it on me,” Sanders said, checking his pockets with his left hand. “Right here!” Sanders produced a folded letter.

“Do you want to open this letter and read it?” said Merkin. Sanders tried to unfold the letter with one hand, waving it around to get the crease a little open. In that brief moment of distraction, both the Moldovans and the Frenchman’s guards brandished their own guns.

“The contents of your phony letter are irrelevant to me!” said Merkin, “You put your gun down, and you will be free to return to London or whatever merde British city you hail from.” It was Sanders on one side, and the Moldovans and Merkin’s personal guard on the other. I knew Sanders had previously telegrammed the Yard, asking for a contingent of their finest coppers to descend upon Marrakesh, whereupon he was met with a response which read, “ABSOLUTELY.” It was only later that I learned that the “NOT” had been lost due to the electrical interference of the Saharan desert.

“You put your guns down!” The planned backup had not arrived, and without my intervention, Sanders would be dead, and the diamond lost.

I walked right up to Merkin, and a number of the goons pointed their firearms right at me. I said with the biggest grin I could muster, “Merkin! My old friend! It is I! John Cook! From the embassy!”

“What the hell are you doing here, Cook?” screamed Merkin. Sanders stared at me in bewilderment. I gave him a knowing wink.

“Yes, me, Cook, from the British embassy! Just an innocent member of the diplomatic corps, nothing else! No involvement whatsoever in human or signals intelligence!”

The Moldovans eyed Merkin funny. “You recognize this man?” said the Bald Moldovan.

“No, I mean yes, but he’s just… a detective!”

“Another detective? In one garden?” said the bald one.

I just had to press a little further. “We at the embassy just needed a little update on our… shared joint-intelligence gathering mission with the local police on the location of some shady Moldovan gangsters. Did you set the fake meet yet?”

“You’re speaking nonsense, stupid Englishman!” Merkin started to sweat nervously. The Moldovans now aimed their guns at Merkin, and the Frenchmen aimed their guns at the Moldovans. In that brief period of confusion, I rolled off to the side and ducked behind an especially thick saguaro.

“Sanders, duck!” I screamed as a hail of

gunfire erupted from the peaceful garden. I crawled on all fours. Sanders was across from me, taking cover behind a fountain. In the middle was the necklace, lost in the confusion. The Frenchies and the Moldovans fired their guns, missing constantly. Shell casings rained everywhere, a number of pots shattered and spilled their dirt on the ground. In a mad dash, I raced to the necklace and scooped it up as I sprinted towards the exit. I turned back to see Merkin, blood seeping from the wounds in his chest, lying facedown in a shallow pool. Sanders joined me a second later, and a second none too soon: we made it out of the Jardin Moutarde just before a cadre of French police stormed the place.

CHAPTER VIII

SANDERS LOOMED BEHIND the telegraphist, waiting anxiously for a response from Scotland Yard.

We were more or less trapped inside the Postes et Télégraphes office, a squat, white building in the Guéliz district of Marrakesh. Sanders and I were stuck waiting for a telegram from London, to confirm if our little adventure in the Jardin Moutarde made us heroes, or criminals. Marrakesh was in a brief state of freefall, with two of its biggest illicit players off the table. A number of Sayed's highest-ranking associates had been captured, trying to flee the city on their donkeys, although a number of his foot soldiers remained at large, having disappeared almost into thin air. It had been three hours of anxious waiting when the printing telegraph whirred to life, the telegraphist gently snaking a growing strip of white paper tape out of the vaguely film-reel-looking thingamabob

on that ridiculous doohickey of a machine.

Sanders tapped the telegraphist on the shoulder, “You bloody well read it!”

The telegraphist, a scared-looking Moroccan in a pair of stylish bifocals, read the message aloud: “HEY GUYS STOP DCI MOLTON HERE STOP HOPE YOU HAD A SPIFFING GOOD DAY STOP”

“Bullshit, we’ve had a terrible day!” said Sanders, knowing full well that that was not how telegrams worked.

“SORRY TO HEAR THAT SANDERS STOP I SPOKE WITH THE FOREIGN SECRETARY STOP HE SPOKE TO THE RESIDENT GENERAL STOP AND,” the machine jammed a little, and the scared Moroccan spent a couple tense seconds untangling the spool, despite Sanders’ death glare.

“ALL IS WELL STOP RATHER NOT GET INTO ANOTHER TIFFY WITH THE FRENCH STOP DIPLOMATIC INCIDENT AND ALL STOP ALSO TELL COOK TO MAKE AN HONEST WOMAN OUT OF MY DAUGHTER OR I WILL SHOOT HIM DEAD STOP”

Sanders glared at me. I shrugged. Ms. Molton had been left on the shelf for so long, she’d have her pick of the litter of men to make her honest, and an unctuous mouth to keep them. Who knew the genes which made DCI Molton spray like a fountain during his spittle-laced dressings-down would lead to Ms. Molton blossoming into a first-rate fellatrix? She was a good friend. As for

Sanders and me, we breathed a sigh of relief. The necklace was safely ensconced in my pocket. Sanders had completed his mission as well, avenging those poor Chinamen, and a weight was lifted off his shoulders, which would be of no help to Sanders at all as he'd soon find another weight to keep him back down.

"Well, my old friend, it's been a hell of a day," I said. "It pains me to say, but your company is... preferable to dying in most circumstances."

"Let's not start acting like Ms. Molton," Sanders said with a wry grin, the first of his whole trip.

I let out a small titter as well, despite it being at Ms. Molton's expense. If you gave an apple to half of the officers in Croydon, they'd speak of you like a small saint.

I raised a toast, holding that cursed diamond instead of a shot glass: "I guess we'll always have Marrakesh, eh, old chum?"

"If I never see another grain of sand in my life, it'll be too soon..."

CHAPTER IX

I RETURNED TO the foundouk to find my room empty, save for a single camera, and an assortment of sundries.

I had hoped to find Dihya there, lying sensually on that straw bed, wearing a silk negligee, or a soft kaftan dress, or even nothing at all. I loved her in the daylight, and in the nighttime, and I loved watching the light of the kerosene lamp catch on the peach fuzz of her arms and face. You ever remember the silhouette of someone so well, you could see them with your eyes closed, or in the dark? I placed the camera, a Vest Pocket Kodak, safely in my Gladstone, the film to me would be worth a million trillion of Mme. Chassepot's necklaces. I would develop it in London, and the portraits, I would put on pendants and such, and the racy ones I'd hide in a lockbox. I remembered what she said as I asked, rather gingerly, to take a couple photos:

“Something to remember me by?” The ones where she’s dressed like a flapper were primo stuff, she loved that Parisian getup, despite hating the French almost as much as I did.

I made my way from the winding streets of Marrakesh to the train station, ready to board the 3:10 to Casablanca. There, a steamer would deliver me to Brest, France, and I would return triumphant to Françoise with my reward. There was a time when I had relished the thought of it, but now I felt a strange hollowness in my core. I may have let too much of Sanders’ venom seep into me. I made my way to the station, bustling with the sound of irate porters and dandies with more luggage than the King of England. Why would a man need four suitcases, and five hatboxes? There is a virtue in making do, or leaving your excess fineries for the vagabonds to fight over. I was already on the platform, scrutinizing my ticket and hoping the English and French words for Casablanca were the same, when I saw her. My caramel Caliphess, my Berber Boudica, Dihya!

I rushed to see her, dodging several nuns and a family of annoyed Swedes lathered in sunscreen. She was dressed in a light linen overcoat, a tasteful skirt and a straw cloche, wearing travel gloves and clutching a small purse. A porter was carrying her bags up to the compartment of a first-class carriage. From her European-looking getup,

she could pass as a Sicilian or a Spaniard, although I've only ever seen a Spaniard frown, rather than smile as my Dihya did.

"My God, Dihya? You look amazing!" I leaned in for a kiss, one smaller than I would have liked, due to the demands of public modesty. "My train is leaving soon, but I could make arrangements to join you. You should've told me you were coming!"

She smiled faintly, and slowly backed away from my lips, the taste of her still lingering. "My love, I'm not going with you to London. I can't go with you at all. I'm a wanted woman now."

"Nonsense, Sanders has connections to the Yard, and therefore the King, a pardon would come as easily as the Thames fog." Even I knew this was nonsense, but I craved so desperately for one more moment with her. Painful as it would be, I'd cut out all the other women in my life, let them cry, let them screech in rage knowing my Dihya had tamed me once and for all.

"Your place is on that train, Cook. I can't join you, it would only hurt you, I couldn't bear to see you hurt, my love."

Despite myself, a few tears started to well in my eyes. Dihya took a small handkerchief from a coat pocket, and dabbed it lightly on my face.

"Where are you going?" I asked. I looked at her paper ticket. Fátima Almodóvar, it said, heading to Tangiers.

“The train is taking me to Tangiers, but wherever else I cannot say, though it pains me.”

“Is there any way I could get you to London?” I said. “I have a place in Enfield, plenty of sun compared to the southern boroughs.”

Dihya frowned. “I don’t know if I’m the type to cook black pudding in the morning and water the garden in the afternoon,” she said.

“Oh, there’s so much more to do in London than just cook black pudding. Plenty of people to choke to death with your legs,” I said. We both let out a mirthful chuckle from the memory we shared together, violent as it was.

Dihya gave me one last look. “Goodbye, my English rose. Go with peace,” she said, before turning back to board the train to Tangiers, followed by a procession of porters. The last I saw of her in the flesh was her face, brimmed in a straw cloche, looking out of that train window.

CHAPTER X

THEY GREETED ME as a hero in Brest.

When I stepped out of that steamer ship, a small parade had formed around the harbor. Fishermen and ladies with white lace coiffes in their hair greeted me as the hero who returned their lovely Chassepot diamond. When I arrived back at the Chassepot estate, I was given a suitable hero's welcome.

I was in the throes of lovemaking with Mme. Chassepot, her husband away for a trip to the Riviera. I was pumping away as the dainty, white feet of Françoise Chassepot were balanced precariously on my shoulders. "Faster, faster, you English swine!" she screamed, the look of want in her eyes, which flashed almost like anger, and a slight carnivorous grin to her lips. Any other day I would be consumed by the thought of her, fully and whole, and I would be present as any man could be when making love to a woman as fair

and exquisite as Françoise. But my mind began to wander, no, not the intentional noise a man may introduce to his thoughts to stay the moment of emission, but it wandered despite my efforts. I was looking straight at her eyes, as close to someone as any man could be, yet my mind kept drifting to the state of my taxes, the ache in my left foot, wondering whether I had left the stove on before I had left, or if there'd be a chemist open so late. I had no intention of becoming a Monsieur Chassepot, but we were still people, man and woman, were we not? Sharing a connection, sharing an act literally called lovemaking? If I was just not there, not there for her nor her for me, what would distinguish me from the common masturbator, plying his member by the wooden benches at Moorgate Station? Did I not want Françoise? Eventually, I rescued myself from that vacuous state, using my immense powers of empathy, and I reignited my passions tenfold from the look of her carnivorous smile, and the heat of her face now drenched in sweat.

I finished as I usually did, at the exact same time Françoise did (of this I was absolutely sure, women could never lie about that sort of thing). A wave of immense bliss crashed upon me, and I looked on at Françoise like a lover, kissing tenderly her stomach, then the space between her gorgeous breasts, and her lips. But when I tried to kiss her forehead and nose, she let out a panicked

“Arrête! Arrête!”

“Oh, my sweet, stupid Englishman. You are lovely, but I do not permit you to kiss me there. We are not that close.”

I slumped away from the sleeping Françoise, somewhat empty emotionally, even as my body registered the presence of sheer, unadulterated pleasure. I noticed the diamond which I had risked life and limb for, hanging plainly on her neck. I noticed the slightest look of a faint scratch in one facet, something likely invisible to anyone else without my eye. I’d heard rumors of laboratories creating a hardened quartz-like rock, forgeries of real diamonds made in hidden labs in the Orient. Could it be? Could the real diamond be safe in Dihya’s hands? I wandered the streets of Brest, late into the evening, hoping maybe that the splendor of the real diamond was being touched by that same moonlight.

Part Three

A Languid Affair

CHAPTER I

IT WAS A windy night in Seville.

The plaza de toros had been converted into a boxing ring, complete with lights, rigging, ringside seating and a radio announcer off to one side, shouting into a microphone in a nasal contralto. In the red corner was the pride of Bilbao, the Spanish sensation: Rodrigo “El Príncipe” Bengochea; in the blue corner was a man they called the Blonde Bomber, the Bear of West Tampa, Brady Carmichael. In his prime, Don Rodrigo had beaten and blustered his way to the top: he was known for his unnatural speed, his spins and cartwheels in the ring, and the way he would bob and weave like a contortionist, as if his body magnetically repelled punches. At the end of his fights—many of them picturesque knockouts—he would stand and bow to the crowd, as if he had just sung an aria, and they in turn would throw roses at him, a fact which did not endear him to many venues.

Don Rodrigo had seen better days, however. He had been on a two-fight losing streak, and his latest bout with the Bear of West Tampa looked much the same: he was not his typical self, his arms were listless and his punches almost slow and ponderous, and even as he smiled to the crowd I could smell the sherry on his breath. He had abandoned the movement which made him look supernatural, his speed was sapped from him, and he plodded on more out of obligation than thrill. A lovely brunette with tanned skin up to her forearms held a large “3” card as she strutted around the ring, before ducking out through the ropes. Round three began in earnest, and already, Rodrigo was fading.

“Brady is pummeling him with hooks, now a left, now a right! A cavalcade of shots to the body, unanswered!” shouted the radio announcer, “At this rate, the referee may very well stop the match, in only the third round!” Don Rodrigo could scarcely keep his arms up, and despite him standing, the referee swooped in, stopping the fight for Brady Carmichael at the third by TKO. Don Rodrigo lunged at the referee, and a wave of attendants and guards poured into the ring, holding him back.

He seemed unstoppable once, but now he was slumped on the canvas in defeat, unable to even stand as the referee raised the arm of Carmichael, who hooted and hollered in celebration.

Indignantly, Don Rodrigo spat out his mouthpiece and slunk anonymously to the locker rooms, where the matadors would apply their mustache oil and get their uniforms hemmed. This fight had been a live centerpiece for the Ibero-American World's Fair of Seville, and he had lost in spectacular fashion, all to a crowd of his countrymen. I followed my old friend and his sullen team into the locker rooms, where he nursed his black eye, and combed the strands of his once coiffed hair back into alignment.

"Señor Cook," he said. "I apologize for this indignity."

"Nonsense, Don Rodrigo, you did what you could," I said. "But you cannot take any more fights in your state, you must rest and recover!"

"Cook, mi compañero, there is no recovery for what aches my soul," he said, clutching a locket with a photo of Doña Fernanda, a keepsake he would kiss before they wrapped his hands. "You must find her for me, detective."

It was just a week or so ago that I was still in my house in Enfield, where the inimitable Grace Lindstrom-Borman, leader of the British Fascisti (some kind of women's trench coat enthusiast group?) was bouncing vigorously atop me. "Yes, yes, yes!" she shrieked, wearing nothing but a flashy overcoat and an intense-looking armband. "How I adore you!" she said.

"I adore you too!" I answered. How lovely it

was to be adored. “Keep going, my love!”

“For King and Country!” she said. I appreciated her enthusiasm, although by that point I was tuning out the actual content of her words in favor of the sensation of her, and that adorable boyish bob which stoked a fire within me, especially when frazzled and flashing with sweat. With that look of hunger in her eyes, the rhythm of her hips, the heat of her freckled chest, she could be reading Dickens for all I cared. Up to a point...

“Keep Britain White!” she screamed. That was a bit much, I thought.

“Now, now, my love, let’s not get political—” and she swung me to the side so that I was now astride her, and not knowing better, I continued my kingly duty, before she locked and dug those pale legs into my back right at the moment of release, trapping me inside her. Oh, dear. I coasted on the bliss of that feeling, even as a nagging dread rose within me. So she wasn’t a sartorial enthusiast? We lay in the afterglow of our passions, me somewhat perturbed, although quietly stirred by her gusto.

“What did you mean by, ‘Let’s not get political’?” she asked. Gone was the warmth in her face, replaced now by an interrogator’s scowl.

“I’m just not into that women’s nonsense, love. I’m sure the fine men of Westminster can hash out the gory details, I just don’t particularly care.”

Her anger took a scary, altogether unpleasant

turn, “You don’t care? You don’t love our people?”

“I am focused on deeper, more transcendental matters. But, yes, I love our people, and every other people as well, from the Circassian beauties of southern Russia, to the perfumed Formosans of… Formosa.”

She shrieked, and jumped out of bed. “You sully me with your impure body, you cad! I’m now Eskimo cousins with a Circassian, and a Formosan!” She dry heaved at the thought.

Grace bolted out the door, and I tried to follow her, “Wait, wait, my love, perhaps if you took on another hobby, like tennis or water polo, I could welcome you back into my arms?” She stormed off before I could at least offer to pay for her fare home. My neighbor, an old woman named Magdalene, gave me the evil eye, likely on account of my wearing only a pair of silk boxers with cute red hearts in them. At that exact moment, a rolled newspaper smacked me on the side of my head, thrown from a passing bicycling urchin, and I read the headline within: “SPANISH BOXER TO FIGHT FLORIDIAN BEAR.” I had suffered the scorn of resentful lovers and the drudgery of seducing client-divorcées for a little too long. I needed a break from this damp island.

CHAPTER II

DON RODRIGO AND I left in a hurry.

Still punch-drunk from the beating that Floridian Bear had given him, Don Rodrigo leaned on me, struggling to stay on two feet as we stumbled out the red doors of La Maestranza into the street. The white and yellow façade of that baroque bullring felt more like a prison than a stage. A crowd of onlookers, many chomping on churros from the night stalls, stopped to stare at the once refulgent Spaniard, now in the doldrums of his career. Lining the sidewalk were carts full of rotting roses; once, Don Rodrigo's many fans would've bought them all out for a couple pesetas each, but now—with no victory to celebrate—the roses would turn into refuse. A man with a combover, who I assumed was the rose merchant, spat at the ground near Don Rodrigo, no doubt livid on account of his subpar performance.

I hailed a motor car, and we landed at a

colmao named “La Caña Tierna.” The sound of flamenco music spilled out into the street. Women wailing and dancing in flowery dresses, and men strumming their guitars: if the gods were kinder, it would be the way of the world, although it was far too spicy for my Anglo-Saxon bones, which were more suited to the rigors of the Morris dance. It was a modern-looking taberna, with a stage area for performance, seating for revelers, and a bar area for the kind of wistful drinking men sometimes needed when mauled by the day. The barman greeted us warmly, insisting the former champion eat and drink for free. They went back and forth, Rodrigo insisting he pay, before they settled on a price. He ordered wine (typical!) and some kind of soupy tripe.

“My good man, an appletini and a side of lemon pepper wet,” I said. The confused barman handed me a cup of pickled olives instead.

We sat for a while, commiserating, before I asked Rodrigo, “Tell me about what happened to your wife.” Doña Fernanda López-Muñoz de Ayódar was a classical guitarist of some note, known for her soulful interpretations of the works of Tárrega and fussiness with her nails. She was the love of Don Rodrigo’s life, and the two seemed inseparable. Had she been kidnapped?

“I thought her friends loved me, I thought her parents loved me, but she said, ‘They all told me to leave you’!”

“When was this?”

“About a year ago. I thought nothing of it at the time, we seemed happy, but it was only three days ago that she disappeared!”

“Did she give you a reason?”

“She left me a note, it said, ‘I hope you enjoy your white picket fences, but I cannot build them with you,’ which I do not understand at all. A cipher of some type?”

“Hmm, yes, perhaps she’s craving a life of adventure rather than domesticity?” I said, out of my ass.

“But the last part, I found the most suspicious. It was unlike anything else she had said to me before. More than likely, planted by another’s hand: ‘If I’m being honest with myself, I don’t think I loved you at all.’”

I concurred, it was strange. A woman pretending to love you, to play a part, a role, just to bide her time and declare it all a farce? Physically impossible. I suspected foul play, and told Don Rodrigo I would make a concerted effort to return Doña Fernanda safely and soundly, starting in the morning.

Don Rodrigo looked empty, “What good is a white picket fence, without a rose?” He held one in his hand, feeling the bumps where the thorns had been clipped.

Just then, a small crowd of boorish Americans rushed through the door, cackling loudly and

making horking noises. The leader of the pack, a man with facial hair not unlike that of a schnauzer, signaled to the barman and called for some ice-cold cervezas. His arm was wrapped around a pretty redhead in heart-shaped shades, holding a churro in one hand and a frozen daiquiri in the other. He spotted Don Rodrigo, and his mood chilled. “Hey! Hey!” he shouted, as if to a dog. “You fucked up my parlay!” He brushed the redhead aside, and rushed to confront him.

Don Rodrigo, still nursing the bruise in his eye, said, “You bet on me to win, Americano estúpido?”

“No, you Spanish bulldog looking motherfucker, I bet on you to get knocked the fuck out! But you didn’t! You got that standing TKO, and the fucking bookie won’t pay out! That fucking ref ruined my vacation, now you’re gonna pay!” The Americano raised his fists in the Queensberry manner. Don Rodrigo stood up, and hooked him right in the liver. Even at his lowest, no bar brawler could match him. One by one, the schnauzer-faced man’s friends tried to grab him or kick him, even getting lucky hits in, but the Spaniard was too slick, and he dodged their sluggish punches on instinct. The last man went for a takedown, and Don Rodrigo hit him with an elbow just as that man’s head reached his side. He fell to the ground unconscious, and Rodrigo carefully snaked his way out of that sleeping man’s

arms, and back up to his feet. Six or so Americans lay grumbling on the floor. Finally, their leader, a trail of vomit leaking from his lips, lurched out the door, screaming, “I’ll fucking get you.” As I was a lover and not a fighter, I stepped aside and held my stool over my head, readying to use it only as a last resort—no doubt a small mercy on my part.

Don Rodrigo shrugged, it had been another Tuesday night at the colmao. Suddenly, the schnauzer man ran back inside, having recovered from the liver shot. I hit him squarely in the head with my stool, and he fell rather gracelessly to the floor, seeing stars. His redhead date, still holding on to her churro, looked at me with some awe. “That was... so cool.”

“Love, what did you say your name was again?” American girls loved that ‘love’ stuff, it was catnip to them.

“Carolyn, but with a ‘y’ and not the ‘i’ and the ‘n’ and the ‘e’,” she said. “Are you like, British or something?”

“How did you know? You have such a good ear. I’m sorry about your date,” the schnauzer man was still fast asleep, snoring even. “But if you wanted, I could show you around town, show you the places only the locals know.” I bid my friend farewell as I took the arm of that lovely redhead, who asked me with all the sincerity in the world if I was friends with a Mr. Darcy. “He’s an old friend from boarding school!” I said, and she yelped with

joy. God, I love American women.

CHAPTER III

I AWOKE, STILL utterly sloshed on frozen daiquiris.

My American lover had peppered me with little kisses all over my head, in a state of complete adoration, nibbling me all over as if I were a handsome wildebeest and she the lioness. Also, she giggled incessantly during sex, which I found 89% arousing and 11% grating, more than acceptable numbers to me. Inevitably, she would grow tired of me, and out of respect I would do my best to grow tired of her, a skill that I'd never quite perfected. Each lover stains me in their way, as I surely stain them, and some more than others. Sometimes I curse my rueful largesse and my heightened empathy, if only I were more of a brute like the other lotharios. I think I'll remember that incessant giggling for years to come: my sweet Carolyn, but with a 'y' and no 'e'. I politely shoved her aside and—this will sound rather strange to

you prudish types—took one final whiff of her lovely hair as I left the room, ready to solve the case of the missing Doña Fernanda. I let the door close slowly, as she muttered in her sleep, "Heathcliff..." Ridiculous! I'm more of a Captain Wentworth type.

In that early morning just after the sunrise, I took a brisk walk at the Plaza de España, feeling vaguely transported to one of those alien palaces in those pulp novels they sold by the newsstand at Moorgate Station (the one next to the masturbator, Jim). I was making my way to the Hotel Alfonso, where Don Rodrigo and much of his team from last night's fight were staying. I would soon see Fernanda's note in person, and I would more than likely find subtle tells in the handwriting which betrayed a foreign hand. I was working my way through a particularly fascinating theory I was developing about her disappearance—La Chupacabra?—when the morning quiet was interrupted by a commotion, a string of Spanish municipal policemen and more than a few paddy wagons racing down the road, making a beeline towards the Hotel Alfonso. I knew that Rodrigo was in trouble, and I sprinted to the hotel straight away, relying on my quite excellent cardio. I followed the policemen up the stairs to Don Rodrigo's room, steeling myself for whatever horrors I was bound to see.

There was blood, and so much of it. Don

Rodrigo was in chains from his hands to his feet, and a woman lay in his bed, motionless. Her brown hair was matted in blood, and I could scarcely describe the state of her without trembling: it was if someone had ladled a whole goat's worth of viscera on top of her. A few journalists were in the room as well, the room flooding with the light of flashing bulbs. A man with a combover and a beard was barking orders, ordering the men back. He was arguing with another man, "We cannot disturb the body until the forensics make their assessment!" The combover beard man shouted back, "If there's even a half-percent chance she could be saved, we must take her now!" Two men placed the languid woman on a stretcher, and they raced out of the room. I was unsure if any hospital, save for the great, big one in the sky, could save her.

Don Rodrigo was in tears, "I did nothing, I awoke to find her like this, please, Detective Cook! I've been framed! I've been framed!" I felt a shudder deep in my soul. This felt more like a Sanders case than one of mine.

"Out of the room, idiotas, out!" screamed the combover beard man, who I would later learn was Sargento Prado of the Seville police.

I remembered the face of that poor woman, and the tan up to her forearms. She was the ring girl from round three. Inez. She had a naïve earnestness about her, as if she believed her job

was to actually let the audience know round three was about to start. I knew right away the authorities would pin this on Rodrigo. In their eyes, he was a loser, an out-of-towner who disgraced his nation in the ring. But whatever his sins, Don Rodrigo was not a brutalizer of women. He was a champion, and a good husband, and a good friend. We had briefly shared a gym in my police days, along with Sanders, back when I was a gormless Detective Constable, and he a rank amateur in the European division. There was nothing in him which screamed evil.

It was then, backing up into the hallway to let the coppers drag Rodrigo out, that I saw it: on opposite sides of two perpendicular halls, two sets of stretchers, both covered in a white cloth and carried by two men each. The chicanery had begun in earnest. The old switch-the-cadavers trick, one of those common criminal conspiracy maneuvers, an effective (if rather convoluted) way to deter suspicion of foul play. I gave chase to the stretcher closest to me, hot on their heels as the two mystery porters—ominous tattoos barely hidden by the lengths of their white sleeves—ran away, first down a set of ornate stairs, then out a backdoor where an ambulancia awaited them. "Wait, scoundrels!" They shoved the stretcher into the rear of the ambulancia, and drove off. Fools, I thought, complete nitwits. The photomen had already taken their pictures of the body, and once

they were published, I would need to find only one speck, one little iota of detail which differed from the real body, to reveal their deception and clear Rodrigo's good name.

Suddenly, the ambulancia burst into flames, and then exploded in a billowing ball of fire and black smoke. The two men jumped out from the vehicle, coughing wildly as they tore their white orderly clothes from their sooted bodies. That does put a damper on my plan. I smelled what could vaguely be described as the aroma of goat barbacoa, and realizing the smell's true provenance, I retched and expelled my entire breakfast onto the street, collapsing to the floor in agony as the sound of sirens grew even louder. I don't know how Sanders does it. I preferred the drawing room mystery, the pursuit of a missing bangle or a hound covered in phosphorous, to this pulpy, fleshy nonsense.

Somewhat worse for wear, I kept a stiff upper lip about the day's most recent developments, and headed to the Seville Prison, a former convent which was now home to some of Seville's rowdiest gangsters, along with a smattering of rabblerousers who were unchuffed about the premiership of Spain's current junta chief, Primo de Rivera. I stayed well behind of the paparazzi who now swarmed Rodrigo's prison motorcar. Once he was settled into his cell, I was given only fifteen minutes to talk to my old friend. He was in

poorer straits than ever, like Cervantes in Cárcel Real, or Wilde at Reading Gaol.

"Now, who would want to frame you for murder?" I said. Don Rodrigo was now dressed in the black-and-white stripes of an inmate.

"Let's see, there is El Pollito, Seville's main crime lord. He never takes his Panama hat off, some say, out of shame..." I wrote his name down dutifully. "The six or seven Americans I knocked unconscious in that bar, essentially every man, woman and child whose payout got rejected by their bookie... what else, my lovely wife, Doña Fernanda..." and he burst into tears.

"No, Don Rodrigo, even if we assumed she suffered a mere case of the conniptions, she must surely still love you." I was in awe at how deeply the two were in love. I was proud of my friend, an urchin from the slums of Bilbao, and how he had won the heart and favor of the elegant Doña Fernanda, a woman almost his opposite: conservatory trained, with an air of lithe, effortless grace about her, who spoke in a voice as delicate as gossamer, and let her guitar, a priceless Torres, do the singing. I was loved by a woman of that caliber only once, and she had left me, derelict in a train station in Marrakesh. Yet I recovered from that wound stronger than ever, thanks to my own steely will, and the pleasures of strange flesh.

"The chicken man is the obvious suspect, or at least a likely key player. I spotted those Americans

from last night, vomiting into the Guadalquivir River just after sunset, so I doubt they had the constitution to pull off this job."

"El Pollito is dangerous, Señor Cook, you must not face him alone."

"And I don't plan to! I have an old friend who comes in handy for dealing with crime lords," I said, winking to you, the reader! "But first, I must visit the morgue. Even charred, Inez's remains, or whoever it was in that blasted ambulancia, will tell me more than any Spanish cop's slurred testimony." I left Don Rodrigo in that cell, certain I would return with the keys to his freedom.

CHAPTER IV

THE SKY WAS abloom with a spider's web of lightning, and alive with the roar of thunder.

Black clouds circled as I arrived at the door of the Hospital de las Cinco Llagas, so named for the "five wounds" Christ suffered in his Passion. I always wondered why the Catholics called Christ's final moments of excruciating torture a Passion. Perhaps they were sadomasochists. The whole aesthetic was too gory, too lively for my nominally Anglican bones. Still, I preferred the Catholic fish fry to the Anglican casserole, although if I ever were to confess my sins to a priest, I would be stuck in that lockbox for weeks; I wondered if they allowed sharing photo evidence in confession, to expedite the process.

I stepped inside, looking at a painting of the Virgin of Guadalupe which hung right at the front lobby. I mean no disrespect to the Theotokos, but I've spoken the name of Earthly Marys and Marías

too often not feel that twinge of the obscene, if ever I were to do the Ave Maria. A handsome, if somewhat scrawny, man in doctor's robes greeted me, Seville's chief coroner, who answered to the name Daniel Pino.

"You are admiring La Virgen, yes?" said Señor Pino. "The Germans say, the love of Our Mother is not a true love born from wholesome adoration, but the sublimated sexual desires of a repressed clergy, and of men in general, who wish to launder their carnal appetites into something holier, and cleaner."

"Hmm... that's a fascinating—"

"I spit on those Germans!" Pino said, "To sully the name of Our Mother with their psychoanalysis, their Earthly knowledge. I would slay them all, although that would just add more hours to my job." He shrugged.

"—I wholeheartedly agree, Señor Pino. Scum of the Earth, those men."

"You are here for the Rodrigo case, yes? Your assistant called ahead to let us know you would be visiting." It was actually me doing a funny voice, but I nodded along. He led me through a series of sterile halls and buzzing overhead lamps into the morgue section, a squat, white room with a series of sealed doors and examination tables. The body of Inez lay in one table, covered in a white sheet.

"The ambulancia had caught on fire, on account of impurities in the gasoline. The body of

your ring girl is scarcely identifiable. If Rodrigo is as innocent as you say, I am unsure as to how this ash heap could help."

"You are a fine coroner, Señor Pino. But my job is to see what cannot be seen." I pulled the sheet which was covering her carbonized remains, sending a cloud of black dust flying into the air.

"¡Ay, carajo! Señor Cook! Allow me to handle the remains." Ignoring him, I grabbed the skull from that ash heap.

"This... is a goat," I said, utterly perplexed.

"You disrespect Inez! She was a beauty, a farmgirl, not a farm animal."

"No, Señor Pino, a woman does not have horns." At least, not visible ones. I held that goat's skull by the horns. This wasn't a woman's corpse at all. What did happen to Inez? Chopped into sausages and added to paella? I vowed to remain vegan the rest of my trip in this blasted city, to honor her memory.

"Oh, that is a goat. A clever deduction, Señor. My stupid assistants! They did not deign to tell me I was handed a goat, instead of a woman!? ¡Maldita sea! ¡Idiotas!"

Suddenly, two nurses, a man and a woman, burst through the doors of the morgue, pushing a wheeled cot. They were wearing white caps and cotton masks. The woman, a nurse with a badge that said "Karolina", announced in a cheery voice, "We need to cremate this woman at once!"

The coroner, frustrated, shouted, “On whose orders? There is still an ongoing investigation, and now evidence of foul play!”

“Haven’t you heard? The judge expedited the trial, Don Rodrigo has already been found guilty, and will be executed in one week’s time!” said Karolina, which was an awful lot of exposition for a humble nurse. I made a note to woo her later. There was something about her look which lit a fire in my lower half, something about that lovely dress she wore, the wisps of her brown hair, bleached ever so slightly by the sun, and the lovely tan which stopped at her forearms. And then I realized, this woman was no nurse at all.

“Inez?” I said, animated by the jolt of both shock and sheer arousal. Tan lines. Oh, my God.

Inez ripped that mask and cap off her head, and grabbed a double-barreled shotgun hidden underneath the gurney. She aimed it right towards me. In a display of sheer reflexive prowess, I pushed that gurney into her, pushing her aim just far enough so that it cleared my head, but not before nicking my arm. My dress shirt! I winced in pain, and fell to the ground. The male nurse tackled Pino down, and they struggled on the floor. I crawled on all fours, trying to make my way towards the exit.

“You couldn’t leave well enough alone. And now you will die here!” She fired the gun right at my head, missing only by a couple inches and

leaving a sizeable hole in the hospital tile. I stood up, knowing her gun was empty.

"Enough of your womanly violence!" I screamed, "If you exonerate my friend, Rodrigo, I will see to it you are pardoned of all crimes!" And after that pardon, that fire of her hatred could find another channel.

"Rodrigo is a dead man, I want him to suffer for what he's done!" Inez said, rather vaguely.

"Could you elaborate on that? It would save me a whole lot of time." Inez ignored me, and grabbed two shells from her pockets. She loaded them with an ease which betrayed her rural roots, and set my passions roaring. A woman? Wanting me dead? Wanting? If she could see the shotgun rearing within me, she'd stop her hysterics and throw her arms around me. Using my knowledge of thugjitsu, I lunged at her, flanking her with my deft speed before grabbing her in a rear bear hug.

"Unhand me, ¡Canalla!" she said.

"This is purely self-defense! Although, if you were to calm down—"

She bit my arm with such ferocity that I unhanded her from the pain. I saw the marks of her teeth on my arm, and the sight of blood mixed with the indentions of her small, petite molars dulled my senses in an absinthian cocktail of fear and lust. It's just what my body does, dear reader, don't judge! Her shotgun had been knocked out of her hands in the struggle, it lay right between the

both of us. I dived to the floor to grab it, and failing to seize the weapon herself, she ran through the swinging doors out into the hallway. I watched as she ran further and further away, and even with the weapon in my hands, I could no more aim the gun at her than I could aim it at myself. It was unthinkable. Let those abominable Sadean types bed women one day and kill them the next, I would have no part in that French nonsense! I threw that weapon off to my side.

"Why did you not shoot, Señor Cook?" Daniel Pino was atop that male nurse, a ghastly thing, restraining him.

"I... didn't want to kill her," I answered, my heart still racing from the sound of shotgun blasts.

"Ever the gentleman, it seems. It wouldn't be chivalry if it were only for the women we like," he said grimly.

"At least we have her accomplice," I said. I had spoken too soon, unfortunately, and that male nurse mustered the last of his strength and exploded out of Pino's grasp. He reached for the shotgun I had dropped on the floor, and he aimed it towards the two of us, until he saw a couple policemen streaming in from both sides of the hallway.

"No! Male nurse, don't do it, choose life!" I said. He chose death, and we were showered in a spray of blood and skull bits. I screamed, in a rather ungentlemanly fashion. Pino and I sat on

the floor, the last of our adrenaline fading as a horde of Spanish policeman, including Sargento Prado, filled the room.

“I’m glad to see the boys in blue, you will be happy to hear I have evidence which can free Don Rodrigo!” Some of that poor nurse’s manly blood still dripped from my chin. The smell of iron made me gag, I’d known it before only from my ministrations when my lovers were on the blob.

“Someone cuff this stupid Englishman,” shouted Sargent Prado. He looked at the male nurse, now headless, and he made the sign of the cross. He looked at me right in the eyes, “You’re under arrest!”

CHAPTER V

MY SPANISH CAPTORS dragged me to my cell, without even a word to explain the charges.

I had a night of fitful sleep on the cold slab they called a bed. When I awoke, I heard the voice of Don Rodrigo, from the adjacent cell. “Señor Cook? Is that you?”

“Yes, my friend. Good news! I have incontrovertible proof you were framed. Inez is alive! And mad at you for some reason,” I pried gently, making sure not to let loyalty to my client override my rationality. “This plot is far too big for just one woman, but clearly, she has a grudge. Why did she place herself in your bed?”

Don Rodrigo stayed silent for awhile. “She practically jumped into my arms. I let my passions overrun my honor. I disgraced Fernanda with my lechery, but I am no murderer. Where is Inez? With her, I would be cleared of all charges.”

I felt almost floored by his infidelity. A hot-

blooded Spaniard, cheating? It was unheard of. "Good news, she's alive. Bad news, I have no earthly clue where she could be." Stuck in this cell, I would be useless to Rodrigo. I tugged at the door, hoping they may have forgotten to lock it. No dice.

It was then that I heard the sound of a fat man shuffling with a set of keys. And by his side was Doña Fernanda, in a long, silk evening gown covered by a travel coat, carrying a black guitar case. She was accompanied by a chauffeur, who eyed me suspiciously, his sullen face only brightening when turning to face the lovely Fernanda.

The fat man shouted at me, "You are free to go, Englishman! The rich lady got her lawyers to spring you out." I turned to face her, the dark black of her hair turning an earthy brown when hit by the sunlight streaming through the cell bars. I ran out of the cell, brushing the dust off my linen coat. Fernanda walked up to the door of Rodrigo's cell. Rodrigo stood in apt attention.

"Fernanda, is that you? Mi corazón no late sino por ti, amada mía." I could see a flicker of reflection in Fernanda's eyes, but she shunned whatever it was which welled within her.

"Rodrigo. I may not love you, but I would not wish this fate upon you either. I need Cook to help set you free, but this changes nothing." The chauffeur took me by the arm and pushed me

towards the exit, with Fernanda leading the way.

"Fernanda? Fernanda, amor mío... ¿adónde vas? ¡Fernanda!" Rodrigo banged on the door of his cell, weeping hot, bitter tears, in a way which magnified and accentuated his manliness, rather than reducing it.

We walked past the gates of that old prison, out into the streets of Seville. "Doña Fernanda. It is a pleasure to see you. I've heard so much about you." She extended her hand in that courtly way, and I accepted and bowed, kissing the air around her knuckles.

"So, you are the detective Rodrigo hired to clear his name?"

"That's correct, we were old acquaintances, back when he trained in London, to avoid the prying eyes of his rivals." I could see her disinterest growing.

"So, detective, where should we start?"

I thought for a little while, before saying, "Every detail counts. Inez was an employee of Don Rodrigo's management team, but before this fight, he had scarcely known her." I saw the slightest tinge of pain in Fernanda when I said the word 'known'. "Furthermore, she alone could not have coordinated this plot. I need every detail, even the ones which seem the least relevant. Those are often the details that make or break a case."

"Will you conduct an interview with me, or shall I send you all that I know in writing?" Her

eyes betrayed her worry. Whatever she said about not loving him, it could very well be true, but I knew she still worried for him in her way.

"Do you know the art of psychosomatic parallelism? It's a technique developed by the Germans and the Belgians, it guarantees the highest possible recall of detail."

"I'm unaware of psychosomatic parallelism, I only play the guitar after all."

"We will need to retrace the steps of your last day with Don Rodrigo, starting at the theater." Doña Fernanda had just come back from a private performance, likely for some vampiric-looking nuns or for a salon at some pervert's mansion. It was fortunate she had brought that guitar with her, the sound of it would aid in her memory recall. I hailed her sullen chauffeur, and demanded we be taken to the Teatro Lope de Vega, where she had last performed with Rodrigo in the audience. She nodded her head, and the chauffeur obliged.

We arrived at the Teatro, where a troupe of dancing men in monkey uniforms was in the middle of a dress rehearsal. The director was ready to scream at me until he saw Fernanda, with the evening gown and imposing guitar case. "My apologies, Doña, you are free to practice to your heart's content." The director clapped and howled at the monkey men to evacuate.

"So, you're famous?" I asked Fernanda.

"He is a friend, of a friend's friend," she replied

coyly. I told her that I would have to place myself in Rodrigo's exact seat, and she would play the pieces she had performed the day of. She went through a series of rather adorable stretches, and a series of complicated-sounding chromatic exercises, before she played a piece in earnest. She sat on a chair, her guitar at the perfect angle, and her left foot resting on a small stool. She played a slow, languid piece, and I sat enraptured at the way she was consumed, fully and wholly, by her guitar, by the music, and I too was lifted into a world of pure emotion, and my heart was ruptured and yanked by the sound of her playing, the way the pluck of a string would start hard and then taper into sweetness, the way she would dance on each string so smoothly, until the sight of her silhouette, the light of the stage lamps draping her figure and the resonance of her music within my soul melded into something inseparable, and my mind was thrashed into a conflagration of feeling which left every corner marred. I think I shed a tear. I don't think I could make anyone feel the way I did, the way she did to me, on that stage.

"That was brilliant!" I said. "Who was that, Tárrega?"

"Barrios," she said mellifluously. That was my second guess, totally.

She went on to play some lighter fare, yet still my mind was scarred by the beauty of her sound. "If I may ask, why did you leave Don Rodrigo? I

will admit, he has had his failings, but he's a good man at heart. He adored you, fully, he had no ego about him."

"Detective Cook," she said, "I did not say I hated him. I said I never loved him." Her performance continued uninterrupted even as she spoke, there was no change to the rhythm of her playing.

"And the difference, my lady?"

"I was so enraptured by his energy, and the way he doted upon me. He was from a different world, it seemed he felt things so truly, so deeply, so passionately, he swept me off my feet. He crowned me his Reina, and himself El Cid, and I played the part because I knew how much it meant to him."

"Pardon me, but is that not love?" I asked.

Her playing stopped. Her face grew morose, "It was not a love based on a truth, it was the excitement of a performance, the joy you feel when you gain the competence to play each note without thinking. But I could not follow him to the end, because he did not want from me what I wanted for myself, even as I hoped and wished for his success. I knew nothing about boxing, but I loved when he won, we shared a love for adulation. So how could he not love when I performed?"

"Don Rodrigo loved your playing, he was moved as much as I was."

Despite herself, tears welled from her eyes. “Do you know what Rodrigo said to me one day, as I was practicing my scales? He said, ‘You would play such beautiful music for our children.’ And he meant it with such love, such compassion, and I could see in his eyes the life he had wished for me, but it felt like a cage. I could not love him the way he wanted me to. I could not be the woman in his life, to give him his passions, because I am jealous, proudly jealous, and I hold passions of my own,” she played the guitar again, a sad little piece which I had learned was named “The Dream of the Little Doll.”

I could understand the shape of it, but part of me was blinded by the beauty of her sadness.

“My lady, is there anything else you can recall from your performance?”

Fernanda wiped a small, black tear from her eye. “Yes, briefly, a man barged into the theater, he had a comb-over, and he threw rotten fruit on the stage before he was apprehended.” A comb-over? I vaguely recalled another man with a comb-over, no, two, the angry rose merchant and Sargento Prado. I suspected Prado more than the rose man, although I would investigate both on account of my due diligence.

“Finally, where did you go after the theater?”

She said, with a flicker of sadness, “His favorite place in Sevilla, La Caña Tierna.”

I held Doña Fernanda’s hand as she stepped off

that stage, holding the guitar case by her side. “La Caña Tierna, my good man!” I said to the sullen chauffeur. Fernanda handed the guitar case to him, whispering to him that he should protect it with his life. By now it was later in the evening, a little after the sunset, and La Caña Tierna was full of revelers, who paused their partying for a second when they saw Fernanda walk through those rough doors, and I’m sure they were also marveling at my excellent sartorial choices. Fernanda added rather solemnly, “This was where he had brought Inez. She seemed a nice girl, but powerless to his charms.” From the slight pain in my arm from when her shot grazed me, she had more power than most assumed.

“If I may ask, what does this have to do with finding Inez?” asked Fernanda.

“As a detective, you follow leads that may feel important, even if the surface facts may not bear them out. The world conceals more than it reveals,” I said.

I asked the barman for a drink, he handed me a sourish wine, which I drank with some relish. I walked up to the little stage area, the one where dancers were flowing and men were strumming, and I did my best impression of a flamenco dance, which looked closer to a Lindy hop than to anything romantic. Fernanda smiled, mildly bemused and maybe a little annoyed at my free-spirited wiliness. “Join me!” I said, “This is an

important part of detective work, the movement of the limbs jolts the nerves, forcing the neurons to work! It was in all the papers."

Fernanda said shyly, "I don't know how to dance." The crowd stopped, and the old men looked at her in pity.

"I thought all Spanish women knew how to dance."

"That is a stereotype!" she said, rather unguardedly. Some of the bar patrons and the wine drinkers signaled for her to come to the stage.

"You can sing at least?" I asked.

"Not any songs fit for this venue," she said.

"Nothing at all?" She was right next to me now, as I waved my arms wildly and lindy-hopped across the stage. "I can feel my detective skills multiplying! My feet are moving on their own!"

Fernanda chimed in, "There is one song, it's very new, just on the radio. But it's more Cuban than Spanish." It was a little geographically incongruent, but it didn't bother me too much. "You can't do Cuban, can you?" she said to the performers at the taberna. They shrugged, saying they could probably manage Cuban. She went through the changes with the musicians, who from a backroom managed to find a trumpet and a double bass, along with their guitars. She went right up to the stage, and sang a lovely song about a woman who cried black tears, and the old men

managed the rhythm of Bolero and Son just fine, otherwise, it would've been a total disaster.

I danced to the sound of her voice, which betrayed a hidden strength within its euphonious sweetness. I did my best Lindy hops, and even a little Watusi, as she sang about that woman's black tears, and her undying love and devotion despite the death of her illusions. I left in higher spirits, and even Fernanda seemed buoyed by the dancing and singing. There was a part of her that loved Rodrigo's world, even as her heart soured towards the man himself.

The chauffeur brought us to a small hotel, in spitting distance from the Giralda, the great bell tower of the Catedral de Santa María de la Sede. I opened the motorcar door for Doña Fernanda and led her by the hand to the door of her hotel. I gave a small, theatrical bow, and just as I was ready to retire for the night I felt the smallest touch, the tug of her hand on mine.

"Cook... I know what you've wanted all this time." And I thought I had done an excellent job hiding it.

"Doña Fernanda... it's true. I would love to. But I cannot betray my friend, as much as my heart aches to know you in that way."

"I cannot bear the agony of being alone with my thoughts tonight." And I couldn't either, and in the moonlight, with those eyes staring right into the soul she had just cored out with her song, I

resisted as best I could.

"You were amazing, Fernanda. I can see why you are loved so deeply." I summoned everything within me to walk away, and I had just made my first step free from her arms when she pushed herself closer to me, and kissed my lower lip, before working her way up. I felt the echo of that conflagration again, bursting at the seams within me.

"I don't want to be loved tonight, I just don't want to be alone," she said.

"If I do this, I may very well fall for you, and I would fall so deeply I would be left limping and wounded for all time," I said, partly because it was the type of thing ladies like her loved to hear, and partly because it was God's honest truth. "Would you wound me, just for one night?" I asked.

"I would," she said, as she went for another kiss. And I closed the door and we raced to her room, and I tore my clothes from me as if it were a vise, and she let the drape of her silk gown fall on the carpet like tissue, and out of respect for my friend and the lady I adored, I will not describe the way her raven hair looked against the fair olive of her skin, I will not describe the taste of her as I kissed her head to toe and everywhere in-between, I will not describe the litheness of her figure or the softness of her skin or the feeling of my tongue on her neck or her breasts and how when I heard the music of her whimpers it was as

if the void within me had turned into a night so starry and so colored by lights that the light within shone from my eyes, and I will not describe how as soon as I was done and I had finished, I would return to her form and taste her with such hunger until I could recover and then try her again and again, and I will not describe the feeling of her hands, so soft but for the pads of her fingers which were hard and how my skin shuddered as her calluses brushed up against my body, and most of all I will not describe the music of her voice as it rang so close to my ears, in moans almost as symphonic as the vibration of the strings she had hammered and plucked. My goddess, my light, AHHHHHH!!!!

CHAPTER VI

WHEN SHE SLEPT, I stayed awake as long as I could, to keep Fernanda by my side.

The night had given way to the deep, dark blue of the early morning, and I stayed as her big spoon as long as I could, digging my nose into the nape and side of her neck, holding the smell and taste of her as long as I could, like the Spanish loverboys of old. For a little while, I even imagined myself as Don Rodrigo, the Prince she had loved, at least for awhile. I knew that if I slept that moment would be gone, and I stretched the last moments I could feel her nakedness next to mine for as long as I could, until I could scarcely stay awake. I drifted to sleep, and soon after awoke to the blinding light of morning with her gone, except for the faint smell of her on her pillow, and the feel of her warmth and dampness in the sheets. But I could smell bread toasting just outside the bedroom.

Still naked, I walked briskly to the kitchenette, hoping to see my lover still there. “My love, you stayed!” I said.

It was not my Fernanda who greeted me, but Seville’s chief coroner. “Buenos días, Señor Cook. I am Daniel Pino.” He was making himself a lovely breakfast of toasted bread, olive oil and sliced pieces of jamón. “Do you want a sandwich? I made too much for myself.”

I ran back to the bedroom, and put on my heart-embroidered boxers. “What on Earth are you doing here? Who let you in?”

“The door was wide open. I received a message from your friend Sanders. He could not make it in person. He is currently in Sweden, staring at glaciers and the sky very pensively, as he says, but he’s brought along an old friend that may help you.” I dressed in my morning best, nursing that pang of loneliness which threatened to consume me once more. First the girl from Morocco, now my Fernanda. Perhaps if I sleep with more women who wound my soul, my soul will become all wound, and I will feel nothing but the pain of nerves firing forever. I let that wholesome thought drift into the wind as I walked to the address Sanders had sent me.

On the side of a building, there was a set of large carriage doors. I opened them, hoping it would reveal a Packard Six or an Alfa Romeo. Instead, it was a donkey. From Marrakesh? Pino

had accompanied me, and he read a note from Sanders: “This donkey is the fastest burro in all of North Africa. I found him lingering in the train station waiting for you, you seemed to have formed something of a bond. He responds to the name Belén. He may prove useful to you, in my absence. Sorry, I have to go, a dour Swedish woman wants to use my body to forget the trauma of her dead sister. I’m pretty ambivalent about the whole situation. With love, Sanders.”

The donkey, the one I used to chase Amir, was wearing a proper saddle now, and chewing what looked like a piece of straw. “Hello, old friend.” I mounted that donkey (don’t give me that look) and ambled through the streets of Seville.

“I must go,” said Pino. “But if you need me, I will be at that hospital, teaching my staff the difference between a goat and a woman.”

Now fully mounted, I held on to Belén’s reins, telling him, “Go!” He raced faster than any champion nag, overtaking some slower cars, and I circled around the base of the Seville cathedral before making my way to the site of El Pollito’s lair: The Palacio de las Sueñas. It took only a few minutes for Belén and me to reach the palace, once the seat of some stuffy royals, now the unhidden hotbed of the Seville criminal underworld. It was built in a mixture of Moorish and Gothic styles, and featured a lovely courtyard, shaded by palms and lined with two levels of

columns and arches, all in a nice, mellow yellow. El Pollito was known to relax in that courtyard, wearing a white guayabera and a Panama hat, chomping on cigars shipped straight from Havana.

I dismounted, and walked right up to the gate of the Palace, saying, “I’m Detective Cook! I know what you did to Don Rodrigo!” Because of my iron gaze, and the intense smoldering look of my donkey companion, El Pollito’s goons let me right into the courtyard. The little chicken man was lounging, drinking an Asiático and reading a local paper. He’d laugh gregariously as he scanned the headlines of the sports section, grinning as he read about football players tripping on tufts of grass or tennis stars suddenly blinded by the sun and missing their serves. What startling coincidences, he’d say, before laughing some more.

“El Pollito,” I said. “Tell me where Inez is, and I’ll let you be. But if you hide her from me, I’ll tear your little criminal gang limb from limb, until you’re nothing but a limbless thing, writhing on the floor, on account of your lack of balance.” Nailed it. Sanders would be proud.

El Pollito, still reclining on a folding chair, put his newspaper down for a second. “¿Quién diablos es Inés? I have no idea who you’re talking about, Englishman.”

I was fearless now, I took that fat Spaniard’s newspaper and I tore it out of his hands. “Inez! Your operative! The one who tried to kill me at

the morgue, the one who's working with your friend, Sargento Prado." His left eye twitched from the name. That got his attention.

"Oh, so you think because I work with Sargento Prado on occasion, I know who Inez is, I know whatever the hell is going on with Don Rodrigo?"

"You don't just work with Prado, you're brothers!" I grabbed that man's Panama hat, and I threw it like a frisbee. His hat was hiding a comb-over the whole time.

"Stop doing that, idiota! Yes, he is my brother. But I have no clue as to what's happened to Don Rodrigo! Killer nurses, dead ring girls, does that sound profitable to you?"

"Don Rodrigo was on a losing streak, you lost millions when he failed to deliver."

"What the fuck are you talking about, carajo? Failed to deliver? We knew about his marriage troubles, his love of the vino, we knew what every other bookie didn't in his first two losses: that he was a loser, that he lost his edge. We bet on the underdogs, Don Rodrigo failing was our biggest boon in years!"

"So you and Prado didn't conspire to humiliate and kill him for losing you loads of money?" I asked, genuinely befuddled. I had a great theory, I drew it out with a diagram and everything.

"I haven't spoken to Prado in months! To any of my brothers!"

Brothers? More than one? I remembered the rose merchant who spat at the feet of Don Rodrigo, just as we had left the bullring together. He had a combover as well, but I had dismissed him initially because of his humdrum job. I assumed that, regardless of his grudge, he did not possess the resources nor the cunning needed to stage Inez's fake death, but if he were brothers with Sargento Prado, anything was possible for him.

"Does your other brother happen to sell roses?" I asked.

"The one no one gives a shit about? Benito? Yes, he sells roses. He has a flower farm outside town, what of it?"

"And you don't give him any money? Support him if his business ever failed?"

El Pollito laughed, "He wouldn't take a sip of water if he hadn't dug the well himself. He is an obstinate fool, he and his entire family!" Family?

"He has children?" I asked.

"Two of them, my niece and nephew, Jimeno y Jimena, although the girl was overly fond of changing her name, because she hated being a twin." Could she be Inez?

"Could she be Inez?" I said out loud.

"... I don't give a shit!" El Pollito returned to reading his paper.

"That was a very enlightening conversation, Mr. Pollito. I better get going." I tried to sneak off,

but a couple of his goons, now armed with guns, started to flank me, surrounding every exit from the courtyard.

"You understand, Mr. Cook, I told you all this because I will soon be killing you?" I suspected as much. With my soul now carved out by a love I could never hold, the idea of dying in a storm of bullets seemed almost romantic. I wondered whose name will last pass my lips as I die? I mused a little while, and taking the Spanish setting into account, I settled on, "Mi día y mi noche," get it? Because there's two of them! But then I remembered my friend, Don Rodrigo, still rotting in that leaky prison, still banging on the door waiting for his Fernanda. He at least needed to say goodbye. El Pollito continued. "At least you got to solve your little mystery before you died. A shame about your friend, Don Rodrigo, but there'll always be new boxers." He started signaling to his goons, who raised their pistolas menacingly.

I whistled as loud as I could, before shouting, "BELÉN!"

That whirlwind of a nag came galloping through the courtyard, knocking many of El Pollito's goons over. The others who tried to attack found their guns destroyed by Belén's vicious hind kicks. El Pollito himself stood up, and tried lunging at the donkey with a bottle of wine, but that burro bucked his hind legs and gave him a severe kick to the chest. I mounted that donkey,

and we zoomed out of that palace, dodging their gunfire. He knocked the sentries posted at the Palace gates over with headbutts, and we made our escape into the winding streets of Seville. With a new lead, and a new name, our next stop would have to be Benito's flower farm. I circled back to the street outside La Maestranza, watching the roses, now rotting or wilting, being unceremoniously dumped into a flatbed truck by sanitation workers. On one of the rose carts was a convenient little business card, smelling vaguely of rosewater, with the address of a business called "Granjas de la Familia Prado." On the card was a cute picture of three stick figurines, labeled Benito, Jimeno and Jimena. Jimena was the only stick figure with an angry grin, instead of a plain smile.

"Belén, fly!" I said, and I rode out into the verdant plains of Andalusia.

CHAPTER VII

WE CROSSED FIELDS of dry grass and olive groves, ancient horse trails and vineyards.

The light of the midday sun scorched everything in its path. I wore an old poncho, and a straw vaquero hat I had found drifting in the wind. When we were lucky, we traveled in the shade of the windbreak trees which lined the fields. Mostly, I just wiped the sweat off my forehead. I swore I could hear the sound of a lonely harmonica, the strum of strings, or the ringing of a rusty can of pork'n'beans drifting in the wind. It took hours of travel, even at full gallop, before I saw it. A lone cortijo surrounded by dry fields, and a small herd of goats, along with green houses full of roses. How utterly impractical. Just past the ridge heading to the Prado family farm, I spotted them, father and daughter, Benito and Inez. The man loading bullets in a revolver, and the girl in a blue pinafore dress and a straw

hat, holding a double-barreled shotgun. I dismounted, walking in big, rolling steps in boots with spurs that jingled and jangled. How'd my boots get spurs?

"Benito!" I said. "I'm here for your daughter!" We circled around each other, in a large patch of dry dirt surrounded by olive groves. Inez aimed the shotgun right at me.

"Of course you are, pervertido!" He raised his revolver, and pointed the barrel straight towards my heart.

"I need to bring her back to Seville, to clear Don Rodrigo's name!"

"Don Rodrigo? The bastard who left us destitute with his failure? The one who took my daughter's honor, and then left her in the dust?" Inez sniffed, there was a redness in her eyes, but her tears had all dried up.

Inez shouted, "You know what that bastard did? Do you!?" She fired her gun right at my feet. "He told me I was special, like nobody he'd ever seen before! He said I was beautiful! Like a desert princess. He said I could be a ring girl at his fights, because I was pretty, yet so strong, and everyone would see me for who I truly was. He called me his little marigold! He said he was ready to leave Fernanda, that they were drifting apart."

She looked out at the endless, rolling fields of dry grass. "He showed me what it was to be a woman. He said I could be his, and he could be

mine. But that bastardo was lying! I heard him begging, pleading with Fernanda, he said I meant nothing to him. He said I was nothing! Nobody at all!" Her voice broke into a shrieking growl, her eyes alight with an anger I'd never seen before.

"How could he be so close to me, and talk so sweetly and move so gently and then say I'm nothing? How could we be as one, like man and wife, together, how could he whisper so much love when I was with him, but then say I am nothing to him!? That I am nobody at all!? Nobody!? Nobody!? NOBODY!?"

I wasn't great at handling women in crisis, but I did what I could. "I'm sorry, Inez, that must really suck. Sounds like a real communication problem! If he'd been open about you being nothing to him before the horizontal tango, you would've established much healthier boundaries! He could've been nothing to you, you nothing to him, just honest, clean fun! He was a real cad for not being upfront, I feel for you, sister."

Inez looked at Benito, "Papa, can I kill this guy now?"

"No, Jimena, he must suffer for what he did to your brother." The male nurse?

I interjected before Inez could kill me, "I'm really sorry about your brother, but he did that to himself!"

Benito took his revolver, and aimed right for my heart. I closed my eyes, readying my last

words, when Belén ran ahead of me, flying like a cannonball towards Benito. I yelled, “Belén, NO!” My faithful steed took five shots for me, and he died, but not before he slammed against Benito, forcing the gun into his side just as he pulled the trigger. Benito and Belén collapsed into a bloody pile together. Benito used the last of his strength to stand, blood oozing from his stomach and his mouth. He looked on at Inez, and collapsed. She stood by his side, and the last thing he saw before his eyes shut forever was her face wet with tears. He lifted his arm to dry them, but the last of his spirit had left him by then. “Jimena...” he whispered in his last moments.

Inez looked back at me, shotgun in hand. To die at the hands of a vengeful young woman, this was bound to happen sometime. I was ready to close my eyes, and maybe drink in my last sight of her in that pinafore dress, when I saw her readying to aim that cursed gun at herself. I made a final sprint towards her, and just before she pulled the trigger, I yanked that shotgun out of her hands and held her in a large, completely platonic hug. I swear.

“For the love of God, stop! I wanted a nice little mystery! And everyone had to start killing each other like a bunch of rabblerousing invalids! For the love of God, woman, live!” Inez cried out, and shrieked as loudly as she could. She sobbed speechlessly on my shoulder.

“I’m going to kill you, Cook! I’m going to kill you!” she cried out. I let her stand, and I cuffed her with a set of party handcuffs I had brought just for the occasion. “I’m going to kill you! I’m going to kill you!”

I looked her right in the eyes. “Don Rodrigo, he was not a good man, at least, he wasn’t a good man to you. But I can’t let him die for a crime he didn’t commit.” She was not entirely there, and I felt myself devastated on her behalf, yet I was also glad she was in that inert state, because the handcuffs were utterly useless for anything other than bachelorette parties.

We walked for half a day on the way back to Seville, she spent most of the time in a state of partial catatonia, whispering, “I’m going to kill you, Cook.” For once, I understood where she was coming from. We hitched a ride with a group of traveling troubadours from Córdoba. They were scarily unconcerned about the woman I had been leading around in restraints. I was grateful for their apathy, although a little wary about their morals. It was another hour trudging through the streets of Seville, Inez in tow, until I could find somebody from the police to clear up the whole Don Rodrigo murder thing, and tell him about the deaths of Benito Prado and my donkey, who in a sense both died in the pursuit of their passions.

Sargento Prado had gone missing soon after the incident at the Palacio de las Sueñas, along

with a number of officers who were at the scene of Inez's fake death at the Hotel Alfonso. Rumor was, they had fled to Venezuela, or Argentina. El Pollito had died from a severe heart attack hours after my donkey had kicked him in the chest, my nag was a hero to the end. It was another couple days of investigation, even with the clearly alive—if snappy—Inez as living proof of the Prados' conspiracy to frame Don Rodrigo, before his execution was reversed and he was finally released.

CHAPTER VIII

I WENT TO greet my old friend, soon after he was released.

He was no longer cooped up in that old convent-turned-prison. He was in better straits, he even spoke of moving up a division, where his reduced speed and agility were not such huge liabilities. He spoke of boxing as an art form, a sweet science, and he made the art of a well-timed shoulder roll and counter sound almost as compelling as a jaunty tune played on the six-string. Almost. Saddest of all, he spoke of winning back the heart of Doña Fernanda. His move to a new division, one filled with much less talent, would almost guarantee a championship belt in his eyes. He thought with enough adoration, with enough applause, even the great Doña Fernanda López-Muñoz de Ayódar could yield, and her heart would once again learn how to love, as it once did.

He and Fernanda agreed to meet at La Caña

Tierna. Rodrigo and I were already at a table, drinking a tart, white wine he called chacolí, when the incomparable Doña Fernanda stepped inside.

"There she is, la cantante, drinks are on the house!" said the barman. She politely demurred. Don Rodrigo walked up to Fernanda, and stooped down to his knees, grasping her hands.

"I know I have wronged you. I let my passions rule me, when I should've been ruled by love, true love!"

"Rodrigo, stand up please. Please stand up." And he did. "I wanted to say goodbye. I'm glad you're okay. I just wanted you to know, you don't have to feel guilty for how you treated me—"

"My love—"

"Let me finish!" she said loudly. She sighed, "I want to let you know, you never needed my permission to make the life you wanted with somebody else, someone who will love you the way you want to be loved. I tried, but I can't give that to you, and it'll only hurt the both of us if I kept trying."

Don Rodrigo looked distressed. "You have your guitar, I dismissed it, it's true! But you are a real talent, I must admit. I will wait. As long as you feel like, I will wait until you want a family."

"But what if I never want one? What if I don't choose? You would resent me, you would hate me."

"And what if you do choose? But instead of

choosing me, you choose to live the life we could've built together with a stranger?"

Fernanda paused. "I'm sorry that it took me so long to see it, it wasn't fair to you. But when I see you act like this, I prefer the stranger to you. Goodbye, Rodrigo." She headed for the door.

Don Rodrigo tried to cut ahead and stop her, and I tried to tell him, "You'll have another chance to talk, give her space, she deserves it." He looked at me puzzled, but he caught a flash of something in my eye, and he said the scariest words one man can say to another. "John, did you sleep with my wife?"

"... It was a mutual—" and he did the reasonable thing, and swung at me with such force that I felt my soul almost detach from my body. And even as I collapsed onto the floor, he kept hitting me with punches, but they felt light, like air, because the feeling of his hits was like a caterpillar pawing at a leaf, compared to that hollowing out I had felt in my soul when I accepted Fernanda's kiss. Fernanda wrapped her arms around Rodrigo, panicked, "Please, stop, please, stop, my love, please!" It was only when he heard the words 'my love' that he stopped. He stepped back, hoping to see Fernanda's face glow with affection, but she looked right through him, emptied of her defenses. I lay on the floor, battered and bloodied from the force of his passionate pummeling, still dreaming of Fernanda

in the moonlight, and in the daylight. I was some kind of biblical evil, the man who loved two women.

Don Rodrigo spat on my face, saying, “If I ever see you in Bilbao, Detective Constable Cook, I will kill you. Do you understand?”

He slipped out the door, slumped and defeated. I still lay in a crumpled pile on the hardwood, bleeding fashionably, in a way which appeared aesthetically pleasing and chic. Doña Fernanda looked at me with those dulcet brown eyes, “Goodbye, Detective. You were a kindness,” and she left as well.

I don’t know if Rodrigo would ever forgive me. I also know I would take a million of his beatings for another hour with his estranged wife. What a man I am, scarcely, fully! I stumbled back up to my feet, and the barman handed me a clean towel to dab the blood from my face. “Take it, it’s clean! It’s been in some strange places, but it’s clean.”

I went out back and walked much of the width and length of the Casco Antiguo. I even spotted Carolyn on a little rowboat with some oiled-up Spanish lover, his chest hairs peeking out of his dress shirt. I tried to duck, but Carolyn spotted me and squealed with delight: “British dude!” she said. “Wait, what happened to your eye?”

I had no energy to lie. “I fell madly in love with my friend’s wife, and when he found out I had slept with her, he pummeled me into near

unconsciousness."

Carolyn smiled, "You're a bad man, Mr. Cook!" and she flashed her oily Spanish lover a cocky little grin, as if to say, aren't I so interesting and cultured and cool for collecting such weird inamoratos? The oily man harrumphed in displeasure. I breathed a little sigh of relief, at least she wouldn't turn into an Inez.

CHAPTER IX

“THAT’S THE PROBLEM with an extended adolescence, you feel adolescent urges well into your adult years.”

Sanders and I were back in London, drinking at a bar close to Wigmore Hall, where the great Doña Fernanda would soon perform a selection of classical guitar works by a certain Manuel Ponce, including some pieces originally for solo piano. Ponce, what a curious name for a Mexican. Sanders had little interest in that high-brow stuff, he was better suited to the dancehall or the jazz den, where he would do his own version of pompousness, “Oh, that’s lovely, the way the G-Minor goes to the C7 on the way to the F” or “You don’t get it, it’s not muddled nonsense, it’s modal interchange.” What a snob. Jazz was blues putting on airs, and I preferred my blues straight up.

“Or perhaps, I feel more deeply on account of my sensitive soul, emotion isn’t just for the

adolescent."

"No, you act like a Parisian dandy, and then whine when a woman gets past your little defenses," Sanders said. "If you stopped running, maybe your head wouldn't race so much." Sanders had his own flame, and they spent twelve years so deeply, so solidly in love. When she died, it left a hole in him, a hole that Sanders now worships! It's the wrong kind of hole for devotion.

"Nonsense, defenses? That's your word. I have mutual understanding, it's completely mature and healthy."

"No, you have hang-ups. Childish hang-ups!" Sanders took another sip of his whiskey, neat. Always neat. I did the same for my tequila sunrise. "I can still remember you pouring your heart out over that Moldovan girl."

"Completely natural. It wasn't my worst heartache, but it was my first. You never forget your first."

The girl from Kishinev, her name was Roxandra. I called her Roxanne, or Roxy, and she seemed to prefer the latter. She was my piano tutor when I was but a lad of fifteen. She was a few years older, and she would visit perhaps two or three times a week at the Cook family estate, what I would call our council house in Croydon. She was impeccable with the keys, she could play Liszt or Chopin with the same passion and verve as I could playing Three Blind Mice and The Jumpy

Monkey. I was the model of a true gentleman back then, rather than a gentleman cad, and I asked my father why I couldn't separate my love of her playing from my wandering eye. He told me something which, at the time, seemed very reasonable: "Don't be a cur, don't be a lech, but God made women pretty on purpose. Just appreciate her beauty, and be glad she has as much to offer to the eyes as the ears." In time, I had won Roxanne over with my manly wiles and my precocious sophistication, and she'd reward me with some makeout seshes and heavy petting after each lesson. That lasted for several glorious weeks until one day, I saw her storming off from my home with tears in her eyes, her hair a complete mess. I ran to her as fast as I could, and with anger in her welling eyes she said, "Away! Away!" The next week, my father hired a fat Italian man to teach me the keys, and I fell out of love with the piano soon after. How I cried for weeks! But in time I learned to appreciate tempestuousness, how you could be loved one second and hated the next, and then loved yet again.

"So you're fifteen, how old was she again?" asked Sanders.

I subtracted a year or two or three from her age in my retellings, for the prudes out there. "Nineteen! Young enough to know and old enough to do," I said. Sanders winced. People didn't understand, she had the talents of a maestro but

the temperament of a peasant, we were practically the same age. I remember the day she chose to meet me at the threshold, the day she showed me what it was to be a man. In my weaker, more unguarded moments, I treasure the memory of her closeness, and whatever good she saw in me, despite her slight halitosis.

"That's a mite concerning, Cook." Sanders was always the moralizer. "If you reversed the—"

"If my grandmother had wheels, she would've been a bike!" I said. I could never get a straight answer from my father about why Roxy had left, the unknown of it haunted me. I knew he was a good man, despite his tempers, and whatever it was, it must have surely been a misunderstanding. I suppose that's why I became a detective, so I wouldn't have to sit with the unknown.

"Whatever happened to Inez?" asked Sanders.

"Inez? Well, I pleaded with the judge, told her she was a victim of circumstance, even convinced our friend Pino to tweak his testimony, so that she was only holding the gun on behalf of her brother. In a sense, that was true, but it took a bit of pleading. Pino was no romantic. Sadly, I couldn't get her pardoned, I only got that sentence knocked down to forty-two months."

"And what did she say about that?"

"She said, she'd kill me as soon as she was out." I already penciled in the date of her release. Whatever she wanted to work out, I'd be ready for

her. I hope they let her tan in prison.

"You are a piece of work, Cook."

I soon headed inside Wigmore Hall, and as I expected, I was devastated by the beauty of Fernanda's playing. I even closed my eyes for a little while so I could just listen to the pluck of each string, the twang and taper of each note. I opened them again soon enough. There she was, undiminished in that red evening gown, the slight curl to the waviness of her hair, which looked raven black in the dark but revealed itself to be a lovely, earthy brown when in the sun's fullness. My eyes grew wet from the tumult in my soul. I saw another man, a swarthy-looking Russian in a green overcoat, also shedding a tear, and a woman who I swore was Mme. Chassepot (a past client of mine), dabbing her eyes with a napkin. By the end of her performance, she had been given three bouquets, although her smile faded just a smidge at the sight of those scarlet roses.

Reader, I know I've subjected you to a lot of darkness, the worst that man can do to man, but this story has a happy ending. I have done it again. My Fernanda, I brushed past her after that performance, we laughed together recalling that night in La Caña Tierna, and she confided in me about the loneliness of her tour, a loneliness I shared as a traveling, consulting detective. And so I went to her hotel room, my stomach in turns, and we made love as we did before. My heart

raced at the sight of her, the curves I could see even with my eyes closed. I won't scandalize her by talking of the pertness of her wits and sass, or the lissome grace of her willowy figure, or the scent of her flower garden. But let me recall a fact about human physiology, apropos of nothing, in words gentle enough for a refined audience: when you climax inside the wanting embrace of a woman you love, right as you are looking deep into her eyes, right as you feel the heat of her breath in your face, something primordial grabs you, something older and deeper than logic, or rationality, or any words any man can muster. It may be the greatest feeling in the world.

And when I was done, I asked her so tenderly if I could kiss the space above her lips: her forehead and her nose.

"What a curious question! I don't mind," she said. And I did, and I felt it. I felt whole. And I wouldn't crash into despair this time, because I knew, whether she be in Paris, or London, or anywhere nearby, she would be there for me, and I for her, every three to eight months, but no less than once a year. And I know she performs multiple days per city.

She asked me the loveliest question, right in the afterglow of it all, "You said I would wound you forever if we made love. Did you mean it?" I saw a flash of worry in her eyes.

I brushed her worries aside, "No, my love,

that's just part of the role I play, you could never hurt me. Does it flatter you, the idea of me crying into my dishes? Weeping alone at night like a jilted lover?" Stuff I've never done, ever.

"You do your own dishes?" she said, coyly.

"Uh, when my servants are on holiday," I said. "Why did you ask about wounding me? Do I make you feel wistful?"

And she laughed in that small way which both stung and seduced me. "You are a sweet little trifle, Detective Cook. I enjoy you." I could never keep her in a cage, but I felt something deep in my constitution, the words ringing true, unbearably true: this would be enough. This is enough for me. This is all I need of her. This is what I wanted. And I'd feel that way for precisely one week and one day, before the noise came back again. But if you ever knew a woman like Fernanda, a woman who you could not love without pain in equal measure, you'd know it was all worth it.

Of course, I tried that same trick of keeping myself awake, my chin resting on her shoulder so I could breathe in the last of her for some time, and in the soft voice of her dream talk she whispered, "Para, que me haces cosquillas..." And try as I might, the comfort of her presence lulled me to sleep myself. I dreamed she was in the kitchen of my Enfield home, although from different angles her face would morph into Dihya's, or Roxy's, or my Year 10 History teacher. She was cooking a

dish which would go from a Shakshuka into a Full English depending on whether I smelled it with my left nostril or my right, the logic of dreams escaped me. But when I walked towards her, she was fully Fernanda, and I wrapped my arms around her with such relish. When I awoke she was still there, stomping around the room half-dressed, trading barbs with an assistant who paid me no heed, like a man in her bed was as mundane as open luggage. Hot! She was clearly groggy, her hair somewhat tousled, and she moved like a small whirlwind, as she put on her travel best. She noticed I was awake, and she said with a sweetness which betrayed that I may have overstayed my welcome, “Hey, Cook, last night was great, I have to be going now, okay?”

The morning after, the sanctity of night making way for the dull delights of the daytime, there was something so winsome about a woman as she brushed her teeth and barked at you to grab a towel for her. I loved that little ritual, ever since my very first one, when I laid alone in my own bedroom sheets staring at the ceiling, a mixture of pride and horror at my nakedness, scared witless and not knowing if I’d be the father of a brood of bucktoothed Moldovans. Since I was a man, I got dressed up an order of magnitude faster than she, although I slowed down just a tad to watch her wash the makeup off her face, whereupon she transformed into the dream girl in my Enfield

kitchen. Now dressed up, she left her heavy luggage for the assistants who would soon swarm the room. I was heading to the door myself, perhaps hoping I could open it for her, when she passed me, and on instinct grabbed the side of my head for a kiss on the cheek, and said casually, "Cuídate, cariño." And she took a few steps before she paused, and turned around to say in that prepared, honeyed way of hers, "I'm so sorry, force of habit." She left, along with her assistant, another sullen man, who eyed me with light disgust. I could build a dream from that peck on the cheek.

I took the tube back to my house in Enfield, in what the prim types would call a walk of shame. There was Magdalene again, my old neighbor, with the judgmental side-eye and the lush begonias. She scoffed as I greeted her. Back home, I sat at my upright piano, a little inspired by Fernanda's playing to shake the cobwebs off my own musical talents. I found the sheet music for an old parlor classic, The Sunshine of Your Smile, and when I played the notes I was taken back to those first lessons with Roxy, the way she moved my hands and told me I needn't curl my fingers so when I played chords, but could stretch them far into the space between the black keys. And I was taken back to the question she asked me, her in that cream-colored blouse and the flower thing in her hair, saying with a smile as bright as sunshine,

“Do you want to kiss me, Mr. Cook?”

Part Four

A Wistful Affair

CHAPTER I

IT WAS A searing day on the train to Samarkand.

The lush greens of spring were giving way to the dry yellows and browns of summer in the steppe. From the windows of our sleeping car, I saw endless plains of dry grass and rocky scrub, broken by green fields of cotton. The conductor said that these railway tracks followed the exact trail of the Silk Road, the path connecting Europe to the Orient, with its tea and its concubines and its Sichuan peppercorns. I felt a kinship to those Venetian merchants of old, except I had traded the rigors of a laden camel for a bumpy Soviet sleeper train. It had been two weeks since we set off from London, passing dour German pines, plaintive Muscovian poplars, the austere plains of the Kazakhs and the deserts of Turkestan, on our way to Samarkand, the old Persian jewel of Tamerlane's empire, now a part of the Uzbek

Soviet Socialist Republic. I stepped out of my compartment, wearing nothing but a pair of boxers and a cotton shirt, out into a narrow hallway and found George Sanders' room a couple doors down.

"Count Rudolf!" said Sanders, greeting me with actorly poise, despite my scandalous look. "What an honor to have such an esteemed comrade visit my little room." I was John Cook, private detective, and these stupid cover names were getting on my nerves.

"Cut the crap, Sanders. I'm tired of the roleplay." Sanders sighed, and returned to lying on his back in one of the bench beds, jostling with each bump of the tracks. His dour expression was focused with magnified intensity at a slight dimple on the ceiling. It made him appear pensive, or maybe constipated.

Sanders cleared his throat. "Lord Caldwell spent a fortune, and more than enough imagination, to create these identities for us. I doubt the Rooskies would welcome us with open arms if they knew our real intentions."

"We're just here to find his brother, not spread the evils of our bourgeois ideology. Quite frankly, I'm not above just finding the nearest commissar and asking where the old ambassador is holed up." I preferred to use my charm, as opposed to this Foreign Section nonsense. I shared their love of fruity drinks, but not the murder: I'd rather bed

gorgeous women and leave them elated yet wistful, than fold them like origami and stuff them into luggage, as the spies do.

Ronald Caldwell was the British Ambassador to the Emirate of Bukhara, before their little Turco-Mongolic monarchy got ousted by the Commies during one of their expeditions in Central Asia. He had condemned it as another act of 'Hunnic barbarism' and refused offers of escape or dignified surrender; the politics escape me, but I was sure our lovely United Kingdom would never engage in such geopolitical chicanery. Ronald had been missing for about nine years now, and his brother Henry had begged the government and every private detective he could find to help him. Even as an MP, his pleas fell on deaf ears: it was only after suffering the most harrowing of heartbreaks that I accepted his suicidal quest, perhaps hoping it would be the one to kill me for good. I guess Sanders tagged along because he'd suspected, or perhaps because he wanted to watch as I expire. Even in London, just before I departed, a man with a black hat and skull cane had come knocking on my front door, saying only that I should not "test my luck" and stay home instead. I figured since I've always been lucky, it was always an assumption rather than a test, and I went anyway.

Sanders stayed fixated on that ceiling dimple. "Once we're settled in, we can start snooping

around. But stay as Count Rudolf! Use some finesse, and think with your brain, not your other organ!" I was unsure why Sanders could not simply say the word 'heart', perhaps lacking one, he could only gesture at it.

"Whatever you say, Mr. Mali Bongwe," I said with a mirthful laugh. Sanders grimaced. Even I knew Caldwell's cover name for Sanders was a mite inartful, but the IDs had all been printed. Henry assured us that despite the lack of any official government backing, his SIS connections would provide more than enough help to make Ronald's rescue smooth and frictionless. Whether Ronald was alive, or just a pair of musty shin bones hidden in the feather grasses of the Fergana Valley, we would be paid handsomely.

I snuck back to my compartment, and just before the entrance of my room I could hear the sound of shifting feet and shuffling hands. I opened the sliding door and found my lovely Katyusha, naked but for a sheet covering her pale bosom. I crawled into that small bench bed with an enthusiasm I had to muster. She was a striking brunette, with soft blue eyes which looked grey in the sunlight. She said she was a journalist for one of those Commie newspapers, Pravda ili Deystviye or something close to it, visiting Samarkand to cover the "Samarkand International Economic Conference", where visitors from all over the disaffected world would marvel at Soviet

collectivization, and the seats on their shiny new tractors. She had joined our little caravan way back in Orenburg, and I had tried to use my charms as Count Rudolf, that cultured defector from decadence, to sweep her out of those fashionable lady trousers these modern Russian girls wore. That failed spectacularly, until I told her flatly that we'd be stuck on the train for the next week, and we could either stare at the tumbleweeds for hours or at least smash our bodies together to feel something. It was an ultramodern seduction strategy, but it worked.

She was shapely and sweet, and any other month I would've luxuriated in the feeling of running my fingers through the vellus hairs of her forearms, but the mechanism I had used to fall fashionably in love and then out of it, the one I used to give some real viv and meaning to my trysts, was broken. I couldn't give her much else but the old horizontal mambo. And yes, I more or less knew she was a spy, or a minder of some kind, who hadn't simply been smitten by my boyish charms. I was vaguely horrified at my lost innocence. Beneath Katya's pleasant exterior I could feel a real contempt, an odiousness that was still hot, but in a more limited way.

"What part of Hungary did you say you were from again?" asked Katya, with a smile that stopped at the eyes.

Holding her close, trying to muster some

counterfeit warmth, I said rather softly, “Uhh... Wallachia?”

“That’s in Romania, did you want to try again?” she said, a little annoyed.

“You caught me in a lie!” I said, still doing that slightly vampiric accent, hoping to at least amuse her, give me anything, woman! “I am from... the Pest part of Budapest! That is the ancestral seat of my family.”

“The Pest part of Budapest?” she said.

“Yes, my childhood home was a yurt... by the river Danube.”

“Nu i debil, blyad’,” she muttered under her breath. “A yurt? By the river Danube? Are you fucking serious?” Her sheer exasperation, coupled with the look of complete derision even as our noses almost touched, made my heart flutter for half a second. And then nothing. That would’ve normally made my day.

“Blame Caldwell, I don’t know anything about Hungary. I don’t even like goulash,” I said, just to say something. “I don’t even know why your people bothered to send a minder for me and Sanders. Ronald is either dead or a prisoner of some Basmachi warlord. He’s no threat to anyone.” This sneaking around was garish. If I could just ask somebody, or pay somebody to tell me. Even puzzles had lost their luster, I could scarcely deduce anything before my brain summoned more of that infernal noise.

Katya stroked my hair, which made me feel a little better. “I just follow orders. I’ve been stuck minding stupid tourists for the past three years. I’m better than ninety percent of the men in my department, and I’ve watched them all pass me by,” she said bitterly.

“I bet if you’re ever tasked with killing me, you’d get your big promotion,” I said. She smiled a little, that seemed to have lifted her spirits.

“You overestimate yourself, Mr. Cook, no one’s ever heard of you here.”

After mulling it over, we elected to spend our last hour or so in the train copulating. I’d just bought a pack of Sheik branded prophylactics from a chemist in Tashkent. She would bend over, her pert derriere up in the air, her arms posted over the bench seats, and I would rut like some kind of bulldog, letting the sensation of her insides carry me to completion. Those lovely stifled moans of hers kept my libido running just enough to where I could keep a steady pace, but I found myself having to say in my own head, “I’m bedding a Russian spy, she could kill me whenever she wanted.” It was a sad kind of erotic overlay, barely a step above reading a script. I wanted to feel the Russian spyness of it all, but I couldn’t. I was out of it, going through the motions, the passion of it nearly gone, and I suspected she wasn’t wild about it either. She kept telling me to speed up, and that her friend Davit had much

better cardio on account of living in the mountains. “I’m jealous of Davit! That blasted Davit!” I said to myself, trying to muster some kind of feeling beyond pure sensation.

It was just as I had finished, my hands on her waist, me still groaning and spasming in pleasure, when I heard the crash of the window breaking, and the slight breeze of a bullet whizzing past the back of my head. I looked to my left from the now broken window and saw a horseman wielding a rifle, wearing a black, hairy cap on his head. “Basmachi!” Katya screamed, diving to the floor. He was a bandit, I assumed. I saw the man on horseback, keeping pace with the train, eyeing me with a mix of confusion and judgment. I was naked, my member quickly deflating. He cycled his bolt-action rifle and reared it towards me, but I dove to the floor just as his second shot rang out. Katya was still barefoot, already wearing her trousers and my collared shirt, by the time I got my boxers on. She waited for the bandit’s shots to stop ringing out, before she took her Mauser pistol and fired it at the horseman. A shot to the leg forced him out from his saddle and onto the drying grass, groaning all the way.

More gunshots soon followed. I crawled on all fours as Katya made her way to the hall. The other passengers began to panic and scream for help. A handsome Asiatic man in a stylish mullet emerged from the other railcar, dressed in sharp civilian

clothes and holding a Nagant revolver. He shouted at the passengers to keep their doors closed. “Pak! Follow me!” Katya said, and they formed a sharp column together.

Sanders burst from out of his room. Approaching me, he helped me upwards and said in that ridiculous cover accent, “Comrade Rudolf! We need to make our way to safety!”

Pak pointed the revolver at me and Sanders, “Is this your doing, stupid Englishmen?” he shouted.

Sanders looked at me funny. “They were going to find out anyway!” I said.

Katya put her hand on Pak’s arm. “They are idiots on a suicide mission, not Basmachi rebels.” That seemed to have calmed Pak. The gunfire subsided. The railcar was quiet. Eerily quiet. Just then, another bandit jumped through the window into the room, alerting Katya with the sound of his boots on broken glass. He fired wildly into the hallway, and the four of us ducked into an empty compartment, Pak giving Sanders the evil eye after the latter stepped on his suede shoes.

I dove to the floor and found a sweet spot behind Sanders. Katya and Pak were shooting, exchanging volleys with the bandit in the black-haired cap. Once his rifle was emptied, Pak ran after him, with Katya close behind. Sanders and I followed them gingerly. By the time we made it to the compartment, which smelled pleasantly of

Katya's nakedness, I saw Pak over the bandit, grabbing him by the scruff of his neck as he landed blows from above.

"Who sent you?" said Pak, his mane-like mullet shaking sensually from the open wind of the window.

With the last of his strength, the bandit grabbed a knife hidden in his hairy cap and slashed at Pak's hand. He screamed, letting him go. The bandit rose from out of that room, took his knife, and lunged at me with unnatural speed. Just before that knife of his could sink into my heart, I smelled the faint scent of jellied eel on his breath. It made me think of home. That bandit was inches from ending my life before he was stopped in his tracks, his blade tickling my chest. The bandit collapsed onto the floor, a penknife sticking out from his jugular. It was Katya. Seeing her end that man's life without a second's hesitation lit a small fire within me, and I asked her in a hushed tone, "Do you think we could—"

"Cook? You're making it weird," she said. The man whose breath smelled of eels was still dying on the floor, bleeding out and gurgling in a rather unmanly fashion. It was a good death, and an honorable one. Passengers were emerging from their rooms, one of them said under his breath, "Bismillah!"

CHAPTER II

WE ARRIVED AT the train station in Samarkand no worse for wear.

Still, I was mildly perturbed that my raging appetites could find no purchase: there was something about seeing death which made Russian girls reflect with mute professionalism, rather than rush straight to lovemaking as the movies implied. Even as we sorted out the clothes we had left in that compartment, including my collared shirt which now smelled vaguely of her sweat, Katya remained withdrawn. Two men in uniform were already carrying that poor bandit's corpse on a stretcher, and the other passengers were already speaking in hushed tones of a man named Rostam Khan, the so-called Last Emir, staging his doomed rebellion hidden among the steppes. Katya was bandaging Pak's cut hand, speaking to another Rooskie in a tasteful lounge suit and cap. He walked up to me and Sanders, flanked by Katya

and Pak and wearing a smile unknown to his race until approximately five months ago. He said, “Comrade Cook! Comrade Sanders!”

I offered my hand and he shook it. “You are?”

“Artyom Artyomovich Bukhanov, but you can call me Tyoma. I am Samarkand’s official Intourist representative! It is an honor to meet friends from the British Isles, London I assume?” He was very observant, which I found deeply disarming. Sanders was less impressed.

“I am from London. Enfield, by way of Croydon. The house next to the lady with the begonias. Thanks for knowing that, I really appreciate being seen,” I said unguardedly.

“Gentlemen, welcome to Samarkand! We apologize for the violence, the bourgeoisie monarchists out there, they still prefer the old ways of eating dirt and locking women up in dank basements, but I assure you, your stay here will be a safe, and guided one. You’ve already met your Intourist helpers, yes?” He gestured to Katya and Pak, who was already holding a burning cigarette in his bandaged hand, which I’m sure was catnip to Slavic girls.

I looked at Katya, and her unbridled contempt for me was starting to melt my defenses. “She has been a total gem. I simply enjoy her.” I offered my hand for a comradely handshake, and she brushed it away with some brusqueness.

Sanders interjected, “You already know who

we are?"

Tyoma flashed him a puzzled look, "Of course we know who you are. Although, there was a strange mix-up, some papers printed with silly names taken from a *Tintin* comic strip. We've taken the liberty of handing you the proper papers." He handed Sanders a neat looking sheaf of documents. "I'm glad we could fix this mishap for you, I doubt it was ever your intention, but traveling under false documents while in the Soviet Union... yikes!" He did a throat-cutting gesture, and it gave me real relief that he knew we were just innocents.

Sanders continued, "You must know we're just here, in our capacity as private citizens, to find the former British ambassador. We have every intention of following the rules and leaving as soon as we're able."

"And I'm sure of it! In the meantime, enjoy your stay! You've come just in time to see one of our veil burnings at Registan Square. We're doing real civilizing work, not just working the locals to death like you capitalist pigdogs." He had said 'capitalist pigdogs' with a cheeky little grin. We shared a knowing laugh together, and I gave Tyoma a warm hug and pat on the back. A charming man. He left us in the company of Katya and Pak.

"If you don't mind," said Sanders, "we'll just head to our hotel." Pak stopped him.

“You are tourists,” Pak said. “Tourists do tourist things.” He guided us in the direction of Registan Square, past a bazaar selling suzani carpets, dried fruits and those shaggy-haired caps those bandits on the train were wearing. By now our minders were keeping a dignified distance, and I stopped to talk to the cap sellers about buying one for me and my friend. The seller informed us the ones he were selling were called chugurma, and I bought a white shaggy one for me, and the black one for Sanders, which he carried sheepishly instead of wearing. By the time we made it to Registan Square, I was already wearing a thin, blue robe called a chapan and carrying a couple roasted shish kebabs with onion in a neat paper cup. I think I had a bit of dried date skin stuck to my teeth.

A crowd had formed around that square, flanked on three sides by three madrasas, resplendent in the sun with the intricate brick and tilework of Timurid craftsmanship, splashes of geometric turquoise ornamentation along the walls and vaulted iwans. In the center was a pile of burning paranjis and horsehair chachvans, and a man in Soviet field uniform holding a bullhorn. I had been expecting some of those tasteful Persians veils which let a couple wisps of lovely black hair spill from the tops and sides, in a very modest yet coy manner. Instead, these veils made the women look like Uzbek phonebooths. The crowd seemed

mildly apathetic or a touch uneasy, many of them there just for the free shish kebabs, although a couple rural types were yelling.

"Comrade Women!" shouted the bullhorn man. "We are freeing you from the feudal oppression and slavery of the past! You are now free to attain employment, to read and write, to walk freely without that unhygienic veil!" A group of veiled women in the center removed their coverings and threw them into the bonfire, some of them looking genuinely relieved, and others mildly cataleptic. There were a few half-hearted claps, and about a half-dozen men who grew agitated at this display. Some Soviet foot soldiers pushed them back as they yelled, their anger directed mainly towards the women. Some of them even threw tomatoes, or flung their kebab sticks at them.

The bullhorn man pleaded, "Together, men and women can walk with dignity and respect, as mutual builders of Socialism! A good husband would respond with joy at seeing his woman freed from the bonds of superstition, a happy wife makes a happy—stop throwing tomatoes this instant!" Some of the crowd had gotten so unruly that the foot soldiers were tussling with the men, and even a few of the women in veils. The rest of the crowd simply looked on, chewing their complimentary dried apricots and kebabs. The veiled women in the center were guided by a group of men away from the crowd, some of them

covering their faces with their hands. I was no Commie sympathizer, but I did agree that you can't have a society of women dressed up as phone booths. Still, I wondered why these angry Tajiks and Turkmen couldn't just sit around a campfire with their Soviet overlords, talk about their feelings, and maybe compromise and use those tasteful Persian veils with the cute tendrils of hair spilling coyly from the side, for those who really insisted on covering.

I saw Katya in the distance, and I gave her a confused look, as if to say, "What's this all about?" She rolled her eyes and shrugged.

Sanders and I made our way to a modest caravanserai. The fancier hotels were still under construction, which was a complete faux-pas of timing on the Soviet Union's part. The bed and room were an upgrade from that room in Morocco, but thinking back to that time brought out that same pang of grief and pain I had tried to cover over with my animalistic romps with Katya. She was no doubt a sweet girl, and a competent mankiller, but the woman I knew in that straw bed in Marrakesh had marked me, as all my great loves do, for life. As soon as Sanders closed the door, I knew there was a lecture coming. He had his own room a door down, otherwise I'd be made to sleep on the floor.

"So you went and told every detail imaginable to the girl who works for the Cheka?" Sanders

said, exasperated.

"Yes. She would've found out anyway, and Caldwell's read too many novels." Once that Count Rudolf guise proved worthless in bedding anyone, I got rid of it. However cynical her choice, it was a small comfort that Katya chose me, and not that foppish old count with the yurt by the Danube.

"That is utterly reckless! We are here to rescue an ambassador, to either reunite him with his family or give them closure, not feed our appetites! Not to waste away in a stranger's arms to drown out your overgrown angst!"

"You knew I was never going to do this the smart way. Why even bother to go with me?"

Sanders paused. "I... would prefer you not get your throat slit by a Communist spy. Wouldn't you prefer that too?" He was genuinely unsure.

I took my hairy cap and robe off, placing them neatly on the hotel table. "If she ever did try to kill me, I'd ask her to at least hold my hand and look me in the eyes, so the last thing I'd see before I go is a woman who wanted to be close to me for the rest of my life." Sanders looked worried, genuinely. I may have gone overboard with the dramatics.

CHAPTER III

THERE WAS SOMETHING unnerving to me about sleeping alone at night.

I didn't even have a stranger's warmth to keep me company. Wherever Katya was watching, it wasn't here. Being alone like this, it brought me back to that scene in my bed in Croydon, staring at the ceiling and in the grips of a fear I couldn't name. Roxy had left in a panic that first night, but the next couple of times, with my father out most nights, I devised a system, a bell on the front door that would ring if ever he came home early and a rope for my Roxy to climb down from out of my bedroom window. She never needed to use the rope. I laugh now, but I was so naïve, I could never be loved in those moments without fear, even as her face grew close to mine. And after it was over, and I still cringe at the thought of it, I asked her to sing so I could drift into sleep. I'd never had anyone to sing me to sleep before. She

thought it was the strangest thing in the world, but she indulged me, and sang something that sounded like, “Nonny nonny puyu mammy.” I think it was a song about pears.

When I’d awoken, the white desert sunlight streaming through the ratty window, I felt almost rejuvenated. This caravanserai had the added benefit of being the last place Ronald Caldwell was spotted alive. I left my room, wishing Katya or any other woman were there, sleeping in the sheets so I could steal a last look and leave as gently as the rains in Kazakhstan. I asked the manager at the front what had happened to the former ambassador, mustering up some of my best Russian from a phrasebook titled, *Speak like a Detective: Russian Edition*. His Russian was more than passable, although he did have that mournful look of a man who wished more people spoke Tajik.

“Tell me about Caldwell,” I said.

“Who?” said the manager. I pointed to the framed picture behind him, with him and Caldwell, his arm on the man’s shoulder. “Oh, yes, Ronald Caldwell. Sometimes, I would call him Robert by accident, and after a while, I took to calling him Bob.”

“What was he doing here? Don’t ambassadors stay in the Russian quarter?”

“Why else, Detective? A woman.” Perhaps he’d gone native? I gained a newfound respect for

Ronald. “He confided in me, he had rejected the woman his family wished for him to marry, and had fallen in love with a woman named Sevara.”

“An Uzbek?” I said.

“Of sorts. Is Uzbek an old term for a new thing, or a new term for an old thing? I do not know. But I did know they were madly in love. I had to put them in the room in the corner, otherwise the sounds of their… dalliances, would disturb their neighbors.” A man after my own heart.

“I hear rumors of a ‘Rostam Khan’ out in the steppes, could he have been involved with Caldwell? Could Sevara have lured him to Rostam’s clutches?”

“That’s a big stretch. Perhaps. I don’t know. All I know is, Rostam is spotted in Samarkand more often than in Tashkent, or Bukhara. Perhaps he prefers the plov here. The last I saw of Caldwell, he was with Sevara, getting ready to leave. I saw them headed out the door, that was perhaps nine years ago.”

I thanked the manager for his time, and followed my nose to the delectable scent of something savory cooking in the distance. I needed fuel if I were to survive the rigors of all this hiking and talking. I suspected that Rostam had kidnapped him, perhaps as a means to extract certain resources from the British. But why wait all this time? I made my way down to a sort of canteen area, leading out to a courtyard where a

skinny man in a head bandana was cooking a cauldron of rice and lamb chunks in a giant brick-lined kazan. He stirred the mixture with a long metal spatula, mixing in shredded carrots, raisins and an assortment of earthy spices. The smell was intoxicating. I grabbed a bowl and sat down, just across from Katya and Pak.

"You don't mind if I sit here?" I said. Sanders was eating with a wooden spoon at the table farthest from Katya, and he gave me an irate look from across the room. He stood up and made his way to me.

"Makes my job easier," said Katya, eating plov with her hands like a local. The rusted gears of my furtive lust were starting to work again. God, the lamb grease on those fingers. Sanders stood next to me, urging me to move tables.

I turned to him and said, "Would you prefer they learn what we know now, or when we're strapped to some gurney in the basement of a hospital?" Sanders relented, and sat right next to me, eyeing Pak with suspicion. It was a good enough reason, but really, I just wanted to sit next to Katya. There's something about my nervous system which just calms in the presence of a woman. I dug into my plov. The lamb was perfectly tender, and the rice separate but not greasy as one would expect from a boiling cauldron. I'd never tasted it before, but it made me almost homesick.

“I do not like this plov,” said Pak, eating from the bowl with a measure of distaste. “The cook is from Tashkent. He cooks like he’s in Tashkent. Why do things the wrong way?” I had no strong opinions either way.

I readied my findings for the table to dissect. “I have a hunch that your Rostam Khan may have kidnapped our ambassador.” Katya looked at me, mock-impressed.

“A hunch?” she said. “If you want to run into the steppes in search of Rostam and get yourselves killed, I say go ahead. It would save me a lot of time.”

Sanders butted in, “It sounds like you’re aware of this man.”

Katya shrugged, “I guess I can share, if it gets you out of the country faster. As you know, the last Emir of Bukhara, Faisal Khan, slipped on a melon rind and cracked his skull as he was fleeing to Afghanistan.” It was news to me, although I nodded along to her exposition. “From the rumors, and the misspelled pamphlets he sometimes leaves around during his bank robberies, Rostam claims to have been appointed by Faisal as his true successor right before he died. He’s only become a real nuisance this past year.”

“A bank robber? Weird hobby for an Emir.” Sanders was rubbing the scruff of his neck now, attempting real detective work.

“He’s barely a warlord at this point. Most of

the Basmachi uprising was quashed years ago, although you get occasional flare-ups, like those idiots on the train."

I had finished my plov faster than I would've cared to admit. I licked the lamb juices from my fingers as Katya eyed me with a bare look which could've been a million different emotions all at once. I swallowed and said, "Simple enough, Sanders and I wait at the nearest bank. We stake out just outside the premises, until Rostam and his gang appear. Then we spring our trap and force him to tell us where Caldwell is."

Pak spoke, "You would be waiting weeks, perhaps longer. Also, it's not in your itinerary."

I was starting to dislike the word itinerary. "How about the Russo-Chinese Bank in the pamphlet?"

"It has not been a bank since 1926. Also, it's not in your itinerary."

"The State Labor Savings Bank in the Russian quarter?"

"Not in your itinerary." Pak's expression remained unchanged.

"What if I wanted to take out a personal loan?"

"We don't do personal loans in the Soviet Union. And the sberkassa is not available for tourists. And it's not in your itinerary." I was getting nowhere with this man.

"Look. I want to make a deal. We follow the itinerary, maybe we visit the Russian quarter, ask

around about our friend Ronald, and if none of it pans out, Sanders and I will walk out into the steppes and then die of exposure. Fair?"

Katya mulled it over. "Excellent. Once you die, we can chalk it up to prairie madness." She looked at Pak, who glowered at her. Sanders seemed somewhat peeved I'd volunteer him for death by exposure, but I assumed he'd follow me anyway.

CHAPTER IV

ONCE YOU'VE SEEN one Perso-Turkic mausoleum, you've seen them all.

The ornate tilework, the domes and minarets soaring to the heavens, the exquisite calligraphy, the geometric ornamentation of the iwans, the brilliant splashes of turquoise and blue as if the sea came billowing in from many thousands of miles away, the climbing, the endless climbing. If the Moslems could invent algebra, and every number imaginable, you'd think they could invent the inclined escalator. I was told by my Intourist guide that if I were to touch any of the calligraphy at the necropolis of Shah-i-Zinda, my fingers would burst into flames on account of the weight of my sins. He said in his thick accent, "Comrade, something tells me your soul is doomed to the fires of Jahannam." The Gur-e-Amir, the shrine of that great conqueror Tamerlane, was in a state of disrepair when I visited, still brilliant in its way,

although hampered by the crews of Uzbek day laborers, ordered around by red-faced Rooskies. I was told in no uncertain terms that Uzbek day laborers make the finest roofers in the Eastern Hemisphere. Of that I had no doubt.

Sanders was off in the Russian quarter, where he and Pak had achieved something of an understanding. They were both incorrigible sticks in the mud, I assumed they spoke in the language of raised eyebrows rather than speech. They were at Samarkand's first Public Library in the European manner, unlike the madrasas which the Soviets had dismantled. It was a humble building in the Gothic style, and Pak would take one sheet of paper, scan it for any state secrets, and then pass it on to Sanders, who would scan it for any mention of Ronald Caldwell. They were working at a rate of one sheet per minute, and would surely locate Caldwell within a century's time. The Intourist buses were busy with an influx of writers from Latin America, so Katya and I rode a cute little horse-drawn carriage on our way to meet up with Sanders. We rode along Abramovsky Boulevard, a large Parisian-looking walkway lined with maples and poplars, dividing the old Moslem city and the new European town.

I was still trying to get bits of lamb from out of my teeth, when Katya said, "You eat too much."

"I'm on vacation. In London, I eat like a monk."

“My mother would say you are the same person wherever you are. And that you eat too much.”

“Are all Russian mothers that… conscientious?”

Katya looked away, “My mother is Georgian.”

“How does that work?”

“When a man and a woman love each other very much, and also the woman is from Georgia, they—”

“Okay, okay, I know what you mean.” We were nearly there to the sberkassa. A woman was pushing a pram by the poplars, she didn’t look much different from the mothers in London with their prams.

“What are you hoping to accomplish, exactly?” she said. “He could be in a shallow grave a thousand miles from here, did you seriously think you could find him?”

“I just needed to be away from London. Something about the air there turns people into eels.”

The carriage dropped us off at the State Labor Savings Bank, the one with the wedge-shaped roof turret across the street from the old business center. The building was mostly empty, as most Soviet citizens apparently saved their money inside their mattresses. There was only one teller, an old woman with a badge that said Lola. Katya stood by the door. I made my way through the long and empty maze of stanchions and ropes until

I approached her station.

"ID, please," said Lola.

"I'm actually not depositing anything. I'm a private detective, John Cook, from London."

Lola raised an eyebrow. "We do everything by the book here."

"No, I mean, I'm looking for a man named Ronald Caldwell. He was the British Ambassador to the Emirate of Bukhara before, you know, the glorious revolution."

"I don't recognize him by name alone."

"How about Rostam Khan? He may have kidnapped Ronald." Lola's eyes lit up in recognition.

"Yes, Rostam. More of a common criminal than anything. Came here about a month ago threatening me with a kitchen knife, but he and his woman left in a hurry when some soldiers came through."

"Rostam, the Last Emir?"

Lola laughed, "You mean what he wrote in those pamphlets? He's delusional, but that woman of his, she's a mean one." As she spoke, the wooden doors of the sberkassa burst open, and two bandits, a man and a woman, entered the building. They had the carefully manicured look of steppe rebels, with the salvaged Soviet field wear, chapan robes and the bandoliers. The man was wielding a thin, curved shamshir, and the woman a Mosin-Nagant rifle. "Speak of the devil!" Lola

said.

Katya leveled her gun at the two and started firing. She ran to the teller station and did one of those gymnast leaps over the counter as the woman in bandoliers fired her rifle blindly. I dove to the floor. The man looked at his shamshir, now broken in two. Both of their faces were covered in shawls, but from the eyes alone you could tell this Rostam was out of his element. I crawled on all fours, but in an elegant way, and tried to make my way to the door, but the woman bandit pointed her rifle at me, waving it up for me to stand. I raised my hands, paralyzed by the intensity of her eyes.

"Lola, Katya, you okay?" I heard Lola say she was fine, and Katya cursing in Russian. The man had regained his composure and walked up to the teller station. He took out a pamphlet from one of his pockets, looked around the bank, and placed it neatly on the counter. I thought it was as good a time as any.

"Mr. Khan?" I asked. "Can I have your autograph?" You can tell a lot from a man's handwriting.

"Mate, I'm a bit busy here, maybe after." He spoke in perfect English, with a slight Liverpudlian brogue. It took me a second to understand the incongruence. Why would a man named Rostam Khan speak with a slight Liverpudlian accent? Perhaps he studied abroad?

“Quiet!” shouted the bandolier woman. I ignored her, naturally.

Lola was desperately handing the man rubles when I asked him, “You don’t happen to know a Ronald Caldwell? I was sent by his brother, Henry, to get him back home.” That’s when he froze. He stopped and turned to me.

“Henry? How is he?” I thought it odd he would ask.

“He’s doing fine, but he misses his brother very much, and he’s willing to pay a fortune to get him back home.” The woman, still pointing her rifle at me, edged towards him, whispering something I couldn’t quite hear. That was when Rostam, looking like he was deep in thought, dropped the broken shamshir and unveiled himself. He had a mustache, and a mop of dirty blond hair, which doesn’t tell you as much as you’d think on account of the phenotypic diversity of the region. Still, I made the obvious assumption.

“You dyed your hair blond, Mr. Khan?”

“No need to be coy, you got me. I’m Ronald.” The woman started to panic, but he placed his hand on her shoulder in a reassuring way, and said to her, “It was bound to happen sometime, Sevi.” That part made sense at least.

“Small world, isn’t it?” I said. Out of all the days. My job here was nearly finished. All I needed to do now was negotiate the exit. “How are we going to do this? How are we going to get

you home?" Sevara glanced at Ronald, with a sadness in her eyes.

Suddenly, Katya jumped from behind the counter, beaning Sevara with a stapler, right on the forehead. She dropped her rifle, and Katya leapt at her, the two tussling on the ground. Ronald, unsure of what to do, dropped the bag of rubles and tried frantically to grab at Katya, but she was stuck to Sevara's back like a tick on a horse. After a couple more seconds of hand fighting, Sevara managed to break Katya's grip and throw her on the ground, and Katya winced in pain from the force of her knee hitting the floor. Sevara picked her rifle up from the floor, and I dove on top of Katya to shield her from the gunfire, and die in a way which would at least look good in the papers.

Katya shouted, "Watch the knee, idiot!"

"Wait!" Ronald swiped the bag of rubles from the floor. "No one needs to die today. He knows Henry, I need to speak to him!"

Sevara looked at me. She said, in a surprisingly delicate way, "Well, we can't talk to him here." The last I remembered before getting knocked unconscious was Sevara thrusting the butt of her rifle directly into my forehead. Those eyes, no wonder Ronald was smitten.

CHAPTER V

I DON'T REMEMBER much of being unconscious.

I did drift in and out of some memories, flashes of the look of want in Fernanda's eyes, although not as vivid as I would've liked. Still, it gives me a great excuse to flash back to the time just before I had accepted the Henry Caldwell job. It was the last day of Doña Fernanda López-Muñoz de Ayódar's tour before a break of a few months, and I used the full extent of my charms to convince her to stay an extra day in London, for a day out in town and a visit to the opera. We were just outside a trendy new Spanish joint near Piccadilly when she almost exploded in indignation. She had scarcely gone through the door when she saw the most offensive thing a woman of her esteem could witness: shrimp in paella.

"John, what the hell is this?" she said, pointing to a couple of gormless accountants eating paella

off some colorful plates. “There’s shrimp in it. Oysters. Cockles. Chorizo. Peas!” Her heart broke at the peas.

“Those aren’t acceptable in paella?” I said, confused.

“It isn’t paella. By definition. It’s arroz con random crap they fished out of your Thames river. It offends me, deeply.”

“I thought Spaniards put shrimp in paella, in Madrid—”

“Tch! Don’t speak to me of Madrid,” she said with real vexation. “You know, I spent my formative years in Valencia and Alicante. In my heart I am Valencian.” She said that with aplomb. I knew I had to act fast.

“You are completely correct. I brought you here so we could laugh at these ignorant Britons and their arroz con random shit,” I said. “I’m going to bring you to some place with real food, very authentic.”

I ordered her sullen chauffeur to take us to a spot in the East End, one my father and I used to visit, called J. Thomas’s Pie & Mash. He and his father had worked in a cannery before he joined the Navy, and even after he had risen from the clutches of the laboring class to the lowest tier of the middle, his fondness for pie and mash never abated. I’d always split the middle of my pies to let the parsley sauce in, adding far too much pepper and copious dashes of malt vinegar when

they had it; my father would tsk and wonder to himself where I'd inherited such an exotic tongue. It was just as I'd remembered, except the prices had soared from my childhood days. Doña Fernanda looked plainly out of place, and some of the regulars cheered me on when they saw her in my arms, as if I'd stolen her from the heavens and brought her to the mortal world.

She was the fastidious type, and eating a mountain of pie was a good way to spend the entire intermission of Prince Igor attached to the loo, so we shared one plate. She took a few generous forkfuls, chewing it over and stifling what was either disgust or dissatisfaction, but like a trooper she swallowed and said, "Very savory, I can taste the... Protestant work ethic." I agreed. I even tried a cup of jellied eel chunks, the kind my father used to love, the ones he said were a great aphrodisiac. I told her as much, and she said that if I ate another eel chunk, I would not be allowed to kiss her. I pushed the cup aside, hoping one eel chunk would do the trick for tonight. She spent the time laughing and smiling as she recounted her time on tour, the way a flock of sheep blocked the road on her way to Zürich, how the cows outside Ingolstadt were utterly entranced by her guitar playing, or how she had spotted a mother and child on a beach in Nice who looked just like her as a child with her mother in Malvarrosa, and how she had wept bittersweet tears at the passing

of the years.

We made our way to a park by the River Thames, about eight minutes from the Royal Opera House. Fernanda and I sat at a bench together, and I was grateful the era of the Great Stink was over, although her rarefied nose could scarcely tell the difference. I looked into her dulcet eyes, readying the speech I had prepared, and I could see—however well she hid it—that same weepiness creeping up in the back of her mind.

"I've only known you for a year and four months, but in that time I've grown exceptionally fond of you." That was something of a lie, I was fond of her from the start. I also knew that she and I had made love thirty-three times over those months, sporadically, some times only once every month or so, and sometimes in a flurry over a span of several days as I followed her around Europe, utterly decimating my meager savings. It was far more than the three-to-eight months she and I had assumed. She took a real liking to me, she needed the feeling of being held far more than she had assumed, but far less than I would've liked. Additionally, we'd been on at least fifteen real, honest-to-God dates, really seeing each other, like an actual couple. It was unreal. I think this is what Sanders called love.

"I know you don't want to live in a cage, but I want to be more than just… paramours. I'm a traveling detective, I know I'm fond of the difficult

case, but if I were to accompany you on tour, I could make a decent living solving the trivial ones, the ones that might take half a day at most. Perhaps a couple correspondence cases that don't require my presence. In the times between tours, I could live with you in Alicante, or you in London, or however you want to divide the time. I truly love you, and whatever you decide it would mean to be with you fully, that's what I want."

"John—" she interrupted softly.

"You may think this is foolish talk, you've understandably heard that I'm wild and free, and you may—"

"John Cook!" she said it loudly now, and the force of her voice scared me to my core. I knew it was inevitable. I knew she'd say I was a trifle, a thing, and she would be right.

She moved her hand to caress my cheek, and her eyes grew with worry. "Another man has offered me his hand in marriage, and I plan on accepting." I held her hand as long as she would let me, before she let go.

"You've always had others before, my love. I'm not sure—"

"I want this one to work. I want to at least try sharing a life with another. He's a good man, a widower with children already, he's patient, and kind, and thoughtful, and he allows—"

"Allows?" I didn't know why, but I felt this well of anger pour from out of me. "What kind of

halfwit would demand you ask for his permission? I've never said this before, I've never been jealous, but why him?"

Fernanda took a few seconds to collect her thoughts. "A part of me loves you, despite myself. You feel things bigger than most men should. You care deeply and you cry too often and you live without embarrassment. You have no talent to speak of musically, but I feel the same ache in my core whenever I hear music as well. You adore me so simply. You love me more than I've ever loved you, and you've never resented me for it. But I can't live on the joy of living alone."

"Why does everyone feel they must balance their joy with misery? Who told the world that misery meant maturity?"

"Te quiero, pero ¡eres un majadero!" She wiped the smallest of tears from her eyes. "I cannot love you unguardedly. I cannot trust you to do the boring things needed to keep a relationship running. I cannot trust you to balance a checkbook, or run an estate, or behave yourself in front of my parents. I cannot even trust you to live rather than die. I don't find it amusing when you endanger yourself on your foolish errands. I think that's your way of hurting others, and I hate you for it."

Tears poured from my eyes, "That was never my intention, I never knew—"

"I hate that you feel I've been using you, and I

hate how much you never hated being used, and I hate how much you might be right, and I hate how foolish, how inconsiderate it was that you kept loving me."

"I didn't have a choice in the matter!" I could feel a theatrical monologue form in my brain, a pleasant mishmash of words that told me more of how I was feeling than what or even why. "I don't know what it is about you, I could list a million reasons, and I'd still have no idea. I say a great many things about love, but I don't know much at all. I yearn for love, and I'm afraid of it. I want to be touched, I want to be wanted, but I was scared of anything more than that, scared to admit I deserved even what I wanted. But you were different. I couldn't unlove you. But I was scared, rightfully so, that you'd never love me the way I wanted to be loved. So I lied, and treated you like a dalliance, even as every part of me burnt with desire for you. And I knew you knew, and I could never be bitter about it, because even the tiniest, scant ration of love you gave me was infinitely more than I deserved."

Fernanda looked back at me with real pain. She was talking more to herself than me. "I want to say goodbye. I hate what you're doing to me. I don't know why men love me. Why they bare their souls for me. I hate how much I've been made responsible for men's feelings. I hate how, despite what I tell myself, I still feel guilty, for Rodrigo,

for you, even though I never deserved to!"

"I wish I could've kept it fun, like you wanted, I wish I didn't feel as much for you. I never wanted to be a burden."

Fernanda sat at the bench, staring at the pigeons in the sky as they circled the air freely, painting the trees white. They didn't get the memo about my soul getting chopped up like steak tartare. "John, I have to leave you, but I don't want to leave it like this, on this stupid bench, with all these stupid pigeons."

I took a deep breath. I knew in my heart these would be my last moments with Fernanda, at least for a long while. "I want to take the woman I love out to see the opera, and then I want to celebrate her last days as a free woman."

Fernanda grimaced. "You know it would kill you. I don't know why I have this power over you. You've given me this power, for no reason at all. I can't."

I don't know much about life, but I did know the right words to say to a woman, to get her to go over that crest of doubt. "You've spent your entire life being kind. You played the part for Rodrigo, far longer than he deserved. You had a talent, something that brought actual joy to the world, and you insisted on sharing it, despite the imbeciles who told you not to! You chose, in whatever small way, to love me. For once in your life, choose to be cruel."

“You said once that I could wound you forever. Did you truly mean that?” Did she care? Or was this what she said to get herself riled up? I loved it either way.

“I did. You can be kind the rest of your life. But I want you to hurt me today.”

So I went to see Prince Igor with my beloved Fernanda, holding her gloved hand as we sat at the box seats that cost me more than my last two divorcée case fees combined, and she and I cried together when the Polovtsian girls sang about wishing their songs would fly like birds, so that even the tiniest sliver of their true selves could find their way home, and she and I spent the intermissions flushing those bites of pie and mash from our systems. And once Prince Igor concluded, and the dancing maidens bowed their last in the curtain call, Fernanda and I made our way to the hotel room, and I melted into her with such passion and fervor and life, and the fact that I had known her thirty-three and now thirty-four times meant we knew exactly what to do, the curves of her, the calluses which sent shivers through the whole of me when she ran her left hand down my back, the lovely curl of her dark hair in the lamplight, the way I would kiss and taste her everywhere. We flowed from position to position like a pair of Georgian chain wrestlers, and in the small hours of the night we ended in the lotus position (which, as true scholars know, is infinitely

preferable to the Swirling Indian), and we rocked back and forth as slowly as we could as I looked into those eyes, which looked back at me with love, her whole face just glowing with it, and I didn't care in that moment that it was temporal love or bounded love or conditional love, it was love, truly and fully. She loved me, and I loved her. And once we finished, she collapsed on my chest, and I spent the last of my waking minutes stroking her hair and feeling the hotness of her breath on my skin as she said, perhaps in sleep, perhaps awake, "Ay, si Dios no te hubiese hecho tan necio..." which, in my limited Spanish, I believe translates to, "If only God hadn't made you such a fool..." which was the nicest thing anybody has ever said about me. It was the sweetest and cruelest thing she ever did, making me feel the full weight of what one woman's love could be like, something more endless and boundless than even God could imagine, before leaving me with her absence, so that I could never escape truly knowing the contrast of what life was like with her and without her.

CHAPTER VI

SEVI YELPED IN surprise when I came to.

She raised the hem of her tunic over her head, covering her face and revealing her gorgeous midriff, and a hint of underboob. Ronald stood beside her, in his beige kurta and white trousers. I was propped up against the mudbrick wall of a small courtyard. The sky was a deep, cloudless blue.

“Sevi! You don’t have to do that, this man is a friend of my brother’s.” She lowered her tunic, revealing her face. She had a comely roundness to her Eurasian features, and the slightest hint of a unibrow. The subtle unibrow look had been growing on me all week.

My old clothes were gone, replaced by a white gymnastyorka and khaki breeches, with the puttees and everything. We were in a small mudbrick fort which stood atop a scrubby knoll overlooking fields of cotton and orchards full of

fresh fruit, about fifteen miles outside of Samarkand proper. I stood up, getting my bearings.

"So, this is where you've been holed up for nine years?"

Ronald spoke, "More or less. We bribe the kolkhoz foremen to leave us alone, and we bribed a man from the State Geographical Society to declare this place a toxic dump on all the maps. We're pretty much left alone to come and go as we please. There's so much I want to show you." My head still ringing, he led me to the inside of his home, which was furnished tastefully compared to the austere exterior. Suzani rugs on the walls, a samovar roiling in the corner, carpets, a smaller indoor tapchan, a kind of raised platform, in a corner adjacent to the window. It was a lovely domicile for a dead man, although a poor one for an Emir. He opened a large, ornate drawer and took out a wedding photo album.

"I'm sorry, we got off on the wrong foot, allow us to reintroduce ourselves. I'm Ronald Caldwell-Khan, and this is my better half, Sevara Caldwell-Khan." She did a little dance as he said her name. "We did the two surname thing, because we wanted our story together to be our together story." As if on cue, Sevi presented her hand to reveal a thick, gold wedding band on her ring finger, inscribed with Sufi poetry. She wore a cheeky smile, always stopping to give Ronald a

couple loving glances.

"We've been married almost ten years!" Sevi said in a bubbly tone. "That's tin, right? Or aluminum? I can't wait to show you our photos!" She squealed in delight as she took the album book and spread it on the tapchan.

Sevi and Ronald stared at each other for a whole five seconds, before Sevi continued, "We got married at my dad's place in Bukhara, the Palace of Moon-like Stars, it was... magical. It had great water features."

I butted in, "A palace? Your father was Faisal Khan?"

"Don't interrupt! The caterers were perfect, we got them for a steal because my daddy was the Emir, the oshpaz who did the plov was so sweet, he had the mustache and everything. And the yor-yor singers were so great, I almost cried, I did cry. We couldn't do the stuff involving the groom's family, because they didn't approve, and it made me so sad!" She leaned her head on Ronald's shoulder as he cooed and call her his little honeybear. She went on, "My wedding dress, we went for an East-West fusion, because of the whole East-West thing? I mean, I'm already kind of East-West, and Ronald's just West, but it made a lot of sense! It was so beautiful. At the reception, my sister Gulnora got totally buzzed on winecoolers, which was like, really inconsiderate. But she's like, great at dancing, so she gets away with it. Ugh!"

Ronald sighed, “It was the happiest day of my life. She is my soulmate, my sun, my moon, and all my stars.” Sevi awwed, and did a little smirk. Sevi flipped through the photobook until she stopped at a photo of Faisal Khan in his signature blue chapan, looking rather nonplussed as he danced with his daughter.

“I miss him so much,” said Sevi, as she shed a little tear, which Ronald dried with a kerchief. “This was the father-daughter dance, it’s like a British thing. I wanted to try it because it seemed so sweet and cute. You know he has, like, a thousand kids? Literally! But that day, I wanted to feel like I was an only daughter, you know?” I didn’t know. “Most of the stuff here came from the registry. We lost so much when they like, took over, but we’re getting by. All we need is each other, right?” Sevi and Ronald did a little Eskimo kiss.

“Honeybear, I need to steal our guest for a little while, we have to talk shop.”

“Ronnie! If it’s about you trying to kill Old Joe, I really think we should talk about that more! I don’t think that’s good for us!”

“Honeybear, you spoiled the surprise! I know you don’t like my little plan, but I want a real future for us! We’ll talk about it later, okay?” Sevi frowned.

Ronald led me outside to the perimeter of his mudbrick fort home. We walked to an outdoor

well pump, where he started washing his feet and hands, splashing his face and sucking water up his nose, which made him sneeze and gag. Snot was pouring from his mouth and nostrils. I asked him what on Earth he was doing.

"It's called woodoo! Ritual purity thing! Very important before prayer." said Ronald. "My wife is a Moslem, as you know, and neither of us get all five prayers in. Sorry God! But, I try to do it when it feels important."

"I'd like to talk about getting you home, and of course you can bring your wife—"

"Exactly, exactly, my wife! Her faith is important to her. Won't even touch bacon, which I respect, and she does the Ramadan thing, although she tends to falter sometime in the middle weeks —those apricots, they're the little sin fruits—but as long as you start strong and end strong, that's what matters to God, right?" I was unsure what verse or hadith said exactly that, start strong and end strong, but I assured him his attempts at faith were admirable. He took out a prayer rug and laid it at an oblique angle, and said some words I couldn't quite decipher. When he was done, he asked me about Henry.

"How is he, my little brother? Still working in insurance?"

"He's a Member of Parliament now, he's been trying to pressure the government to stage a rescue. You got me instead." Ronald smiled, then

frowned.

"He's a good man, my brother. But he doesn't understand, I'm destined for greater things. You should head back inside, we've got tea! Straight from the turkmen. I'll catch up with you later." I headed back as he performed a series of calisthenics moves which he claimed were good for the tendons.

I stepped back inside the Caldwell-Khan home, and Sevi closed the door as she whispered to herself, "Bismillah!" I thought their marriage was solid, but I guess I could give her what she wanted.

"Yuck! I can see that glimmer in your eye, Mr. Cook! I'm not Gulnora!" I made a mental note to seek out this Gulnora once things died down.

"What did you want, then?" I said, a little gently in case the sex thing was still on the table.

"It's about Ron's plan to kill Old Joe. You know? The big guy who, like, runs the Soviet Union? I think... it's probably a really bad idea."

"I agree in principle, Ol' Joey Steele would be none too happy about dying, but what part would I play in all that?"

Sevi pondered for a bit, circling her foot on the floor, before she continued, "All those robberies—and we didn't kill anyone!—they were to pay for an exit, so we could run and find somewhere safe. There's a train coming tomorrow night that'll take us eventually to Kazakhstan, we were going to

settle there until we figured things out, but if Henry wants him back, maybe… you can put in a word in for me? I know the Caldwells never liked me, they think I'm weird, but I know he misses them, and if they accepted us together, we'd be so happy!"

"How'd he get so set on killing Old Joe then?"

"He thinks once the big guy dies, everyone will bow down and make him the new Emir. I love him so much, but that romantic side of his can make him a little…" and she did a cuckoo gesture with her finger. "I keep telling him I love him just the way he is, but he feels awful he can't give me the life he thinks I want. But I had the rich girl life, and I felt awful! I want a life with him, and if he does that stupid thing he wants, he's going to die. Like, painfully!"

"How do you plan on taking him to that train willingly?"

She produced a scary-looking hypodermic syringe. "Willingly? He'll be mad for a little while, but he always forgives me! But he can't forgive me if he's dead!" I did not want to know what concoction of barbiturates or anesthetics was in that syringe, I trusted Sevara completely. "I looked up the doses in the public library. It's like, completely safe, but only for Ron!" She placed the syringe back in the drawer with the wedding photos.

Suddenly, I heard the muffled sounds of

struggle come from the ornate armoire next to the tapchan. It sounded like... Sanders?

"Oh! I caught this guy sneaking around the cotton fields, probably tailing you! I kept him alive just in case he was a friend of yours." She swung the armoire doors open, and Sanders spilled out, strung up and gagged but in a platonic way. Sevi took his restraints off, and Sanders sprang from the floor, truly irate.

Sanders shouted, "What the fuck is this!?" It was a familiar feeling by now.

I explained, "Very quick recap: this is Ronald's wife, Sevi." She did a small, apologetic wave. "Out the window, you can find Ronald, doing calisthenics. He thinks he's the next Emir, and he wants to kill the big guy."

Sanders was confused. "God?"

"No, no, the J-man."

"Jesus?"

"No, no, Old Joe, Georgian Steel, the big guy!"

Sanders paused. He ran up to the window, and Ronald (still in the motions of some calisthenic nonsense) gave him a big wave. Sanders returned, looking back at me with surprising calm. "I don't know how you did it, there might be some genius stuck in that idiot head of yours, but I have to hand it to you for finding him. I'm mad right now, but I'm also glad this stupid quest is nearly over. So I'm gonna get over it."

I asked him, "How'd you get past the hot

Korean man?" Sevi's eyes lit up at the words hot Korean. She really was an Uzbek.

"Pak? He was just leaning against a wall, smoking a cigarette and staring out at a window. I don't even think he noticed me leave." Naturally.

I was about ready to give my old friend a good-natured hug, when the gentle sound of wind and birdsong was disrupted by the pounding of horse hooves coming closer. Suddenly, three bandits in Basmachi getup jumped through the open windows. A switch flipped inside Sevara, and she went from effervescent hostess to a trained killer, brandishing a peshkabz knife. Sanders pumped his fists uselessly. I was hit by the smell of jellied eels and the men's body odor, which had a distinct Anglian tint—the same scent from the train. It dawned on me just then that neither the Uzbeks, the Tajiks, the Turkmen, nor even the Kyrgyz, had any tradition of jellied eel cuisine—my God, these were Britons! Foreign spies, my own people, dressed up as Central Asian rebels. If these were my own kind, I could at least persuade them to surrender peacefully.

"Let's keep a stiff upper-lip about this sort of thing, instead of devolving into violence as the continentals do. Please?" They seemed unimpressed.

CHAPTER VII

THE FAKE BASMACHI with the mutton chop beard lunged at me first.

I hit him with the old one-two, which only seemed to make him mad. He punched me square in the jaw, which really hurt! I then pulled his hairy cap over his eyes, blinding him, before delivering a whirling back kick which sent him flying. My years of thugjitsu had proven their worth. Mutton Chops proved more durable than I'd thought, and he rose up like an undead specter and ran towards me again. He knocked me over with his speed, and I fell to the ground. He brandished his own knife, and still on my back, I kicked him squarely in the knee, and he winced in pain. I scrambled back up, and he did the same, but now I knew my victory was assured: I had surely torn the ligaments in his knee, and it was only a matter of time before he was down for good. "Ready to surrender now, old chum?" I said.

He responded with a wry grin, but just as he was ready to go for a takedown, Sevi stabbed him unceremoniously in the neck. She went up to the man with the chin strap fighting Sanders, both of them going blow-for-blow, and slit his throat from behind in gruesome fashion. The third man, the one who went for Sevi first, was already choking in his own bloody spittle, his chest riddled with stab holes. All three fake rebels lay on the ground, blood rushing to their lungs instead of air, as the lights dimmed for them. The sound of their liquid gasps almost made me retch. I had hoped for a nice, barroom brawl instead of all this morbid violence, but I was at least blessed with the sight of Sevi covered in blood. The look of that violence upon her reminded me of my lover way back in Marrakesh, and my heart ached. I was glad Ronald had found his Emira.

"There is something severely wrong with you," said Sanders, miffed. "How the hell did you—"

"My daddy insisted I learn self-defense, some Judo, some Kurash, minus the parts with the olive oil. After he died, this kindly old Russian colonel trained me in Sambo! But because I wasn't a man, I couldn't compete in any of the tournaments!"

Gunfire began to descend on the old mudbrick fort. The three of us ducked, as Sevi rolled into the courtyard. Sanders and I made our way to the fort's wall-lined rooftops. In the distance, I saw him, the man with the black hat and skull cane.

More potshots pelted the mudbrick walls. Sanders took an old Mosin-Nagant rifle leaning against the parapets, but he couldn't get a clear shot at any of the attackers. Eventually, the Skull Cane man waved for the fake bandits to stop.

"Detective Cook!" he said in his shrill voice. "His Majesty's Government demands you hand over the traitor Ronald Caldwell, and his dim whore of a wife!" That was rude!

Still leaning against the rooftop wall, I shouted, "This was meant to be a peaceful mission! Why would you Foreign Section types even care? This is strictly a private matter!" I took a quick peek of our assailants, there were at least eight of them, dressed almost like Basmachi rebels but for the stark uniformity of their outfits. The same color papakhas? Amateur hour.

Skull Cane man grew irate. "We've known about this Ronald character for a little while now! We sent him money, resources, in the hopes he'd use it to foment some actual rebellion! Who do you think wrote those immaculately spell-checked pamphlets? Instead, he wasted the money to build this sad excuse for a palace, doting on his local strumpet, like he was on holiday!"

I shouted back, "Sounds like a perfectly decent use of government funds!"

"When we figured out he was useless, we tried sending people to kill him, but they always ended up dead! Killed by his newfound Soviet friends, no

doubt!" I looked at Sevara, still in the courtyard level looking for something. She gave me a big shrug, stifling a laugh. Skull Cane man continued, "But to find out that the great Detective Cook was helping him, now that was truly a surprise!"

"Please go on, I like how everything's coming into focus, plot-wise." It really did help, I wouldn't have been able to piece any of this together otherwise.

"It's only fair, since you're all about to die! I don't quite have all the specifics, vis-à-vis why you'd help Ronald on your so-called 'rescue mission', but I say kill them all, and let God sort them out!"

Sevara was back, holding a metal box with a wire sticking out of one end. She was leaning on the stairs leading up to the fort rooftop, and she shouted at me, "Is Ronald with them?"

I peeked again, there was no Ronald in sight. I shouted at the Skull Cane man, "Is Ronald with you? We seem to have lost him ourselves!"

"Are... are you kidding me? He was just doing calisthenics a second ago!" said the Skull Cane man. I looked at Sevara, and shook my head. No Ronald there.

"Cover your ears!" Sevara screamed, and Sanders and I did as we were told. She twisted the handle of that strange metal box. For a few seconds, nothing happened. Sevi tapped it again, "I could've sworn—" and a rush of hot, explosive

air came bursting from the grounds around the fort. Sevi covered her ears as well. Giant fertilizer explosions, from barrels subtly hidden around the perimeter of the mudbrick fort, blasted the mounted Basmachi impostors into pieces, killing their horses as well. Sevi cried as she heard their dying neighs, “Oh, God, the horses! I’m so sorry! I’m so sorry! God forgive me!” Sanders winced at her selective empathy. Big clouds of dust and clods of dirt rained on us, and when the dust settled, I could see only one man left alive, but mutilated: the Skull Cane man.

Sevi took the rifle from Sanders, her face eerily blank. She went out into the grounds of her mudbrick home, her arms shaking, but she steeled herself as she shot the horses mauled by the explosives, straight to the brain. One fake bandit, buried under a horse and missing a leg, tried to reach for his holstered pistol, but Sevi shot his hand. None of the horses could be saved, and none of the men either, save perhaps the Skull Cane man. Her eyes welled with tears. She used the pump well to wipe the blood and dust from her arms and face.

Sanders and I walked up to the dying Skull Cane man. I remembered him now, he was a government lackey who’d occasionally toss me cases, detritus too tedious and boring even for the public sector. It was good money, but bad for the soul, and after I’d bedded one or two public

servants he made it a rule, banning them from even looking at me! I miss those secretaries with the square-rimmed glasses. I saw his skull cane, resting in the dirt.

"This is a regular skull cane, right, no hidden tricks?" The Skull Cane man, mangled on the ground, nodded yes. I held the skull cane by the far end and threw it out into a field, and it popped and shattered in a smallish explosion. "That was a mite dishonest!"

With his ragged breath, he said, "I have a cache... save me... all will be forgiven..." Blood was pooling at his stomach, it wasn't a fun way to go, and he wasn't a horse either. The Skull Cane man watched as Sevi fired into the last of the dying horses, her eyes still wet from crying. In his last moments, his face might've flashed with a flicker of recognition. Sanders and I left him there, spotting a stable nearby where Ronald might've fled.

Ronald had left a note by the kolkhoz stable: "Sorry about your horse, will return after mission finished, got spooked by randos on horseback. I love you honeybear!"

Sevara looked at the note, "The big guy was planning on attending the last day of the Samarkand International Economic Conference, at the old Russo-Chinese Bank building, at 8:30 PM! That's when Ronnie will try to get him."

I stared at the conspicuously large pocket

watch attached to my wrist. Where'd that come from? "Oh dear, that's in four hours! Can't you just track him down?" I said.

"I can try, but if he's a master at anything, it's hiding. It'd take me forever to find him, and we don't have forever! The old bank is the one place we know where he'll be." Sevi brought Sanders and me together in a huddle and told us, "We need a plan, just in case you can't walk him out of the front door. I hate this last-minute improv stuff! I'm always the one who likes to plan, plan, plan! But I don't have time, Ronnie was always good at this."

I spotted a small open-bed truck loaded with loose sacks of unprocessed cotton. "It's far from ideal, but if Sevi can park that truck over by one of the second-story windows, Sanders, Ronald and I can jump out. It should be soft enough to survive. But she shouldn't park it by the window too early, or else their guards will investigate. Right at 8:30 PM."

Sanders interrupted, "Jump out of the window? Unseen?"

"Only as a last resort. If we can just walk him out, the truck will be parked a block or so down, and we'll just climb aboard and drive away with no one the wiser."

Sevi spoke, "But what if something happens inside the building, and the Soviets target the truck? They'd kill us in seconds!"

This was a conundrum, but despite the rust in

my brain, I had a stroke of inspiration. “The bodies! They’re all spies, no government will claim them. If we have to jump out, we’ll have some of these dead, jellied-eel men already in the truck. When they see them dead, they’ll assume they already got whoever caused the ruckus. We jump out of the truck, escape on foot, and the discrepancies in the men’s wounds will be hidden by their gunfire. You know the Reds love shooting. But this is just a last precaution. I’m sure we can drive away long before that.”

Sevi handed me the mystery syringe, “Just in case he doesn’t listen to reason!” The tone of her voice implied I’d be all but guaranteed to use it. “Sanders, would you do me a huge favor and help out with the bodies?” Sevi said, batting her eyelashes. “Then you can run along and help Cook out with finding my Ronnie, m’kay? I’ll park the cotton truck down the street, like Cook said, and move it to the window at 8:30 PM! For the love of God, please get Ronnie to the truck before then. Your plan kind of sucks.” Sanders was annoyed at her matronly tone, but he did as he was told.

CHAPTER VIII

THE RUSSO-CHINESE BANK was a garish, teal mishmash of neoclassical and Russo-imperial design.

Communist and socialist luminaries from around the world had gathered to discuss the foremost issues in Socialism Building. A delegation from Germany had been the most disruptive, most of them in spectacles, arguing that the Soviet Union had already compromised on its vision of a Socialist dream by demanding the usage of such instruments as commodities, resources, raw materials and physical labor. Instead of the "commodity form", these dorkish Germans argued for a new, radical vision of Communism, one in which vanguardism and mass populism were replaced by a cadre of Philosopher-Comrades formed in every University Department, who could seize the means of production and redistribute the spoils of revolution via telepathy, rather than

having to do the ugly work of going door-to-door like some common politician. The mainstream Leninists had called them infantile, indistinguishable mentally from Anarchist children and the free love “fruit drinkers” they so despised, and these ultraleftists in turn called them “electoralists”, “union lovers” and “cuckolds of the capitalist class.” A small group of anarchists from Ecuador thought they had found common ground with these Germans, but both sides laughed them out of the room, metaphorically.

Personally, I couldn’t care less about their Commie philosophy squabbles. Although, there was one greasy Frenchy (or was it a Quebecois?), in his own little booth, who had argued that the realm of human sexuality had transformed itself into a kind of sexual marketplace, characterized by a permanently frustrated sexual underclass of losers who couldn’t get any puss, and a bourgeoise of sorts who got all the action, turning what was once a more equitable world into a lawless jungle of supply and demand. When I asked him how to fix this issue, he leapt from his chair and hissed, before crawling up the walls and noodling his way out through a tiny crack in the ceiling, but not before leaving a book about his ideas for me to peruse. I could scarcely comprehend the verbal and philosophical mind games the attendees were playing, but I knew that some fluency in their language allowed me to seduce some of the

hottest, least stable women on the planet. I dipped my toe in that radical right pond once or twice and found it wanting, but these radical lefties had a stranglehold on the comely artsy-fartsy types. That reminded me, where was Katya? Those form-fitting wool trousers with the sweaters and the white-collared shirt; God, just thinking of her stoked a fire in me now. I don't know if I could ever love again, but lust, I could lust after these leftist birds all day.

Some of the attendees, particularly the girls from Southern Brazil, were tempting, but I had a job to do. The 8:30 PM deadline was fast approaching, and my man Ronald was nowhere to be found. I knew he was faintly blond, and a disgusting pigdog monarchist, but I couldn't tell him apart from the sea of non-bespectacled blonds. Many visitors were wearing masks and hoods. A few anarchists from Catalonia made my heart flutter, the dark black of their hair gave me visions of Fernanda, although their faces more often wore the sharpness of their convictions than that soft, subtle gaze that could pierce steel. Could I woo one of them, get an echo of an echo of my Fernanda, and do the job? I approached a crowd of them and said, "Hey, comrades, who wants a quickie in the bathroom? I got prophylactics!" Nine out of ten of them walked away in disgust, but the one who stayed set my loins on fire. She was a real Spanish beauty, and in the light of the

restroom she looked vaguely like my Fernanda, but by the time I was done in the stalls, sheepishly handing her paper towels to clean our little mutual mess, it was already 8:23 PM. Shit.

I met with Sanders, hanging close to the Nigerian delegation, who were focused more on independence and securing for themselves a treasure in shiny Soviet tractors than any academic quarreling. “Update on the Ronald situation?” said Sanders discreetly.

I was still in that post-coital melancholy, a kind of peace only women could grant, when I said, “Oh, ahh, I’m doing great, thanks for asking.”

“Jesus Christ, Cook.”

“Her name was Cat. Cat Alonya. She looked so much like my Fernanda.”

“I think she lied to you.”

“She did? That’s hot. I pick the best of them, you know, she wasn’t just a tryst, she was a way of knowing humanity. I’m not shallow, I’m skimming a deep ocean.”

“You didn’t stick yourself with some of Sevi’s syringe, did you?”

I kept looking for Ronald, there was only a minute left before Uncle Joe himself would make an appearance. Even the other lovers in the restrooms left to crowd around the center atrium, a sort of makeshift remnant of the central lobby. Even with limited invitations, the space was packed, and something about the heat of all those

leftist girls made my libido spike, although the presence of leftist men cooled it to a rational level. I knew that wherever Ronald was, he'd be close enough to the makeshift platform that he could try to bum rush the Joe man himself. 8:28 PM. Suddenly, a large cadre of Soviet foot soldiers formed a column, and from the gaps in their marching I could see the slight silhouette of the big guy. He was pretty short for a world leader. He was approaching the stage, a few soldiers blocking the way, but with plenty of gaps for an attacker to exploit. That's when I saw it, the slightest wisp of a dirty blond mustache. Ronald, disguised as part of the German delegation, spectacles and all. I signaled to Sanders.

It was 8:30 PM. The steel man himself started to speak, "Hey guys, everyone enjoying the festivities? We got vodka in the front and yorsh in the back, everyone ready to par-tay?" he presumably said. His accent was a little thick. It had been thirty seconds of that man's incessant speaking, and I slowly made my way to Ronald, as quietly as I could, syringe in hand. If I poked him in the rear, I could pretend I was just helping a starstruck comrade out of the room. Easy-peasy. But he turned and spotted me, and we locked eyes. I tried to mouth the words to him, "Back away, please." I pleaded. He lowered his stance, his weight on his back foot. He was going to make a run for it. Not that I liked Joey Steelnuts, that

Lenin fellow seemed to have his head screwed on tighter, but I did a mental checklist of all the people who would get brutally killed should Ronald succeed: me, Sanders, Katya, Pak (by extension), Sevi, Lola the teller, and probably a few thousand other people.

Then he went for it. Ronald jumped the stage, knife in hand.

I went after him, knocking a soldier out of the way. We were perpendicular to each other, right on a collision course.

Just as the tip of his blade touched the weave of Uncle Joe's grey tunic, I knocked him over in a bear hug and got him on the ground. My heart was racing. I saw the flash of a reporter's camera bulb. I looked up at the J-man himself, and said in my best phrasebook Russian: "Hi! I'm Detective Cook! I just saved your life! Please be grateful!" The room exploded in uproar. Soldiers screaming. Attendees screaming. Communists roaring in anger. Anarchists fleeing for the hills. Old Joe's personal guard grabbed him like a large rack of ribs and flew out of the room. Already, sirens were blaring. A large cohort of impassioned attendees stormed the stage, to tear apart their glorious leader's would-be assassin. In the chaos, nobody noticed they had piled around the wrong guy. I took that syringe and stabbed that British idiot in the leg. I dragged him away, me screaming, "Somebody help! My friend fainted! Who could do

such a thing!?" I looked at Sanders and shouted, "Upstairs, now!"

Sanders and I helped Ronald, who was now completely sloshed, up the stairs, right at the window we specified. And just our luck, the cotton truck was three rooms down. We ran again, me occasionally screaming, "Oh God, the humanity! These pigdogs have gone too far!" We found the right room. I opened the window. Sanders saw the disheveled pile of cotton sacks and threw Ronald on the pile. His head just missed the platform railing. I breathed a sigh of relief. The cotton truck's engine started, but streams of soldiers were already descending on the building. Just as Sanders was readying to jump, a woman burst through the front doors, in her sexy wool trousers and form-fitting sweater, with that delectable white button-down collar peeking up. Katya!

She screamed in a torrent of Russian which wasn't in my detective phrasebook, "Yob tvoyu mat'! Vy kakogo khuya tvorite, yobanyye idioty?! Gospodi, blyad'! Suka, nakhuy, blyad', suka!"

I said to her, in as calm a voice as I could muster, "We have nothing to do with this! We're just jumping out of the window for the heck of it! When in Rome..." Sanders interrupted my totally persuasive strategy and drew a gun from a hidden holster on his person. That old Webley revolver, useless as always. And because she was a spy, she drew her fashionable Mauser pistol much faster.

“Cook, step aside, I need to blast this bitch.”

“No! Sanders, there’s no need for this nonsense, we can just escape like we planned!” Katya glowered at me with an intensity I hadn’t seen from her before. I can hardly breathe recounting it to you now.

“If you move a single step towards the window, I will not hesitate to gun you both down! Freeze!”

“Okay, okay, that’s fine.” I walked towards her, shielding Sanders from her aim, and Katya from his. “I surrender. Sanders can go free.”

Katya winced, “If Sanders moves, I will shoot.”

I felt this was the moment my little adventure had all come to. “Then I accept your terms. He’ll be gone by the time you finish firing, and you’ll be the last person I ever see. I can die happy.”

“I wasn’t making a deal! I’m trying to arrest you both, you morons!”

Sanders spoke, “Cook, you bloody idiot, duck and let me shoot this fucking sociopath!”

I started to get mad on her behalf, “No! I’m not letting you murder a woman!”

Sanders retorted. “That is deeply patronizing, I’m not shooting her because she’s a woman, I’m shooting her in order to defend my friend. In a way, you’re the one being disrespectful by treating her differently based on her sex. Would you act the same if she were a fat ugly man?”

I blushed. “Probably, I’m a pacifist at heart,

but if I were to give her favorable treatment on account of her sex, why would that be a bad thing? Should we as men unlearn our innate instincts to protect and care for women so we can gun them down and murder them, but in a principled way? 'Oh, I'm Sanders, I love murdering women, but I'm not a sexist about it!' It's, quite frankly, gross. It feels like a thin gloss on... femicide! Femicider!"

Sanders said in frustration, "You're not speaking out of principle. You're saying that because you think she's a hot Russian spy, you have a stupid death wish, and you think that there's a slim chance you could bone her afterwards. How the hell is that principled? That's just your appetite speaking!"

"Oh, and killing a woman doesn't represent a grosser, sicker version of appetite, one that excuses itself with your exact brand of cold, utilitarian logic? So what if I do a decent, moral thing based on an appetite? Better to feed a loving, life-affirming appetite, than an evil sadistic one!"

Katya, still pointing the Mauser at me, was growing increasingly bored by our debate on the morals of killing versus not killing her. That's when I heard the footsteps of more Soviet soldiers, readying to burst through the doors. I shouted at Sanders, "Just run, you uptight masochist!" And with pain in his eyes, he jumped through the window.

Katya shot me, just as she promised. One shot grazed my ear, the other grazed the hairs on my temple, and the last one cut my shoulder by a hair. She was either the worst shot in Eurasia, or she had spared my life in that skilled way of hers. For a good two seconds, I imagined a life with her. But that vision of true connection got quickly subsumed by the white-hot lust welling within me, born from her act of mercy. The last thing I saw before I was knocked unconscious again was her face full of worry, and maybe a dozen or so Slavic men pile-driving into me like a hundred pigs burrowing for one truffle. My sweet Katyusha!

CHAPTER IX

RUSSIAN PRISON WAS duller than I'd imagined.

I expected gangs of shirtless Slavic men, head-to-toe in tattoos with pictures of their mothers and grandmothers next to St. Basil's cathedral along with a list of all the men they had killed with their pinkies. It was mostly middle-aged Uzbeks, jailed for littering, or damaging property, or beating their wives to death for burning their chachvans. I hated the way they didn't look too different from the public litterers. The first day, the guards spent their time lightly bruising me, the basic stuff they did to people suspected of being suspects, cupping the ears to make them ring, a couple solid punches to the abdomen. Worse than Soltau for sure, but still manageable: there, I was forced to wear lederhosen and assless chaps as a singing monkey, the titular "buttboy", in a POW production which I heard later inspired an opera. These days the term

“buttboy” has much darker connotations, connotations I sometimes lean into just to spook the ingrates who pry too deeply into my past. In reality, it was the boredom of Soltau that proved harrowing for my soul. I was captured the first day I was deployed to the field, I only saw one man die up close, and he had deserved it, for telling us to go over the top.

I spent one week in Samarkand’s prison. On the second day, a man with a cart full of tools had entered a room where I’d been strapped to a chair, and just as the scalpel was ready to slice into me, another man burst into the room, ordering him to stop. I laughed. Pure theater, as if I’d never heard of what they did to poor Dostoevsky, who went nearly insane at his own near mock execution. On the last day, Pak (a lit cigarette dangling stylishly from his full lips) led me to an interrogation room, where Katya was waiting for me, dressed in a simple cotton blouse and a pleated skirt, along with a small “Intourist” badge on her chest.

“Got your promotion after all?” I said. I was expecting a leather trench coat, maybe one of those imposing ushankas with the giant hammer and sickle. Her clothes made her look like any other Soviet tourist guide.

“Of sorts. I am now in charge of all Intourist operations in the Uzbek SSR,” she said grimly. I almost wept for her, although I was a little glad she wasn’t made head of dekulakization and gulag

torture, that would've been a real moral tizzy.

"How's Sanders? Ronald? Sevara?"

Katya put on a befuddled look, "Sanders? He's fine as always. I haven't seen him since he was at the tea shop with Pak, the one that was in his itinerary. Sanders had wandered off into a bazaar, but we found him in due course. He's waiting for you outside."

Now I was genuinely puzzled. "The cotton truck? The one—"

She interrupted, "Oh, yes, the one used by those counter revolutionaries. We are glad that you managed to tackle that idiot with the mutton chops, who almost killed our General Secretary's favorite decoy, the one he plays chess with on Sundays. You were filled with such revolutionary fervor that you followed him and his co-conspirators upstairs. You're a true hero, and we apologize for this unpleasantness. We only arrested you out of an abundance of caution, and now you'll be free to go shortly."

"Wait, so there wasn't a woman, or a British-Nigerian man, or a blond, mustachioed gentleman in that cotton truck?"

Katya flashed a blank look. "I have no idea what you could be talking about."

"Oh, so it worked! You know, I concocted the whole plan to put the bodies of the dead SIS agents that Sevara had killed on that cotton truck, the ones from Ronald's secret base when he was

pretending to be Rostam Khan! This was right after Sanders—”

Katya cried out in utter frustration, “Klyanus’ Bogom, yesli ty ne zatknyosh’sya, ya vyrvu tebe yazyk i zadushu tebya im nasmert’!”

“Come again?”

She put her lips so close to my ear that the fires of my lust sprung up like a burning whirlwind. She whispered forcefully, “Why would you say that out loud, you perfidious Anglo? Do you know how much work I put into covering you and your friends’ complete insipidity? Do you know how much I had to bribe that bank teller? Do you think your little trick with the bodies was enough? Even after I had that truck and everything on it set on fire? There was a mountain of paperwork to fudge, witness testimony to skew! Do you know what I had to do to Tyoma to keep him in line? You know, he did something actually intelligent for once, he intercepted Sevara’s communications with her Basmachi contacts, the ones that could’ve led to her and her moronic husband Ronald being taken into Soviet custody, leading to me and everyone I’ve ever even looked at being shot in the back of the head and thrown in a ditch! Do you know where Tyoma is now?”

“He’s in… timeout?”

“Let’s just say, not even the bugs can find him.” That was intense. “I want to be clear, you are alive because the General Secretary was

amused at your antics, and found your bravery hilarious, and because of that, I was promoted to a dull desk job rather than turned into worm food. He was so grateful that a tourist I had minded had been turned into a revolutionary fanatic."

"I'm proud of you!" I said, scared and aroused all the same.

"But I want to be perfectly transparent with you. If you breathe a single word of what you know to anyone, my last act on Earth will be to kill you, slowly and painfully, along with everyone you have ever loved or even liked. Am I making myself clear, former Detective Constable Cook?"

"Yes, mistress, err, ma'am."

Katya returned to her seat, and resumed speaking in her normal, controlled tone. "Was that all?"

"Have you heard anything concerning a Ronald Caldwell?"

"Ah, yes, incredible news. Apparently, the former ambassador had been hiding as a sheep herder in Kazakhstan all this time. He had gotten himself married to an utterly unremarkable local woman. They've even decided to wait for you and Sanders to pick them up on your way back to London. What a happy coincidence."

"Just one more thing," I said. "This might be the last time I ever see you. All your murder talk, it makes me want to have you on that table right now." After all that I'd been through, I was feeling

the Russian spyness of it all. A gorgeous woman's scowl did things to me. I had to adopt a somewhat bleaker tone for these Slavic girls. They appreciated the brute more than the gentleman, and I could tell Katya was flushed with passion because of my slovenly, hairy, slightly bloated prison face. These Russian girls liked their men a little dirty and cruel.

"What the fuck?" Katya was taken out of her performance. "This is what you're thinking of, after everything? You just want to rut like some kind of mindless animal?" I could tell she was considering it.

"It gets lonely in prison. And you wouldn't have even whispered anything if this wasn't the part of the building where they do things that not even posterity will see."

"And why would I even do that, instead of just killing you, and saving myself a whole lot of trouble?"

"Because if you could have me, right here and right now, you could get away with anything."

Katya felt for the gun in her holster. She could have shot me right now, say that I'd gone insane from prairie madness and lunged for her weapon. She let go of her grip on the gun, and looked side to side. "Watch the knee, it still hurts when you put weight on it."

CHAPTER X

I LEFT THAT prison in Samarkand with a burden lifted from me.

I had felt utterly empty, in a good way, as if a load that had weighed me down was suddenly blown in a streaking, sticky torrent. The peace of that imprisoned release filled every nerve of my being with calm. I felt almost lightheaded. Not to be immodest, or impugn the dignity of my favorite spy, but I'd even looked into her eyes as I'd finished, which I knew made the pleasure in the moment much deeper, and the pain of separation much more severe. Katya was astride me, both of us lying on that fusty interrogation room floor splotched with ominous stains, and not the lovemaking kind. In the haze of that afterglow I pulled her into a loving embrace, and she was at first taken aback by the brazenness of my tenderness, but she accepted it with a relish that belied her cold, professional exterior. I felt the

weight of her atop me, listening to the cute, fussy way she'd tell me to scratch the part of her back that always flared with irritation in the humidity. "No, not there, lower, no, higher!" We even giggled together as we heard the distant screams of a man getting his toe nails pulled. I think some of her adorable sociopathy bled into me. I didn't care that my back ached in ways it never did in my roaring twenties; I was dreading the time when I'd have to let her go, when the scent of her hair would fade from my memory forever. It was a manageable pain, or at least a familiar one, although something stranger came along with it, a feeling of guilt.

It was the most curious thing: as I grew fonder of Katya, I grew commensurately more weighed with the guilt of having betrayed Fernanda, despite the fact she had already left me for that marble-mouthed buffoon from Bergen op Zoom with the tree trunks for legs. Was my heart growing jealous? There's probably a better framework for how a man of good standing and healthy appetites organizes his history, but still I feel like a rake, treating some past lovers like Ming vases and others like banana peels. I think Katya would be delighted to know she was now a Ming vase, rather than a banana peel. No wonder men like Faisal had harems.

Apparently, that guilt thing was a very common feeling, after what many people would

call a long-term relationship—an almost foreign phrase to me! Thirty-four times with my Fernanda over sixteen months, and no one else. Not even for handies or blowies. One woman, one body to foist the full weight of my tenderness upon. Maybe that's why she grew sick of me in the end, maybe she recognized my love as a burden, aside from the lack of a stable income and my eclectic temperament. My love for her had spiked my libido, but my attachment made me feel this strange unease at the thought of making love to anybody else. I worked like a dog to pay for those train tickets, a cavalcade of adultery cases I could solve in my sleep, and when my savings would run out to the point where I couldn't follow Fernanda, I even tried masturbating one or two times, and I just found it unsettling. I don't know how Moorgate Jim does it. I remember pawning all of my father's old cufflinks, because Fernanda had made the brave and rather uneconomical choice to travel through South America. I worried for days, until that night in Buenos Aires, after we had made love for the nineteenth time, when I just lay awake with the weight of her on me, her skin lit only by the light of the moon and stars and the heat of her breath filling my soul like wine in a wineskin. It was the second cruelest thing Fernanda did, letting me hold her, letting me feel like I was protecting her. Why did she want to be held in the night, as if I had meant everything to

her, but that wanting had all but dissolved by the day?

Also, I just really missed when Fernanda sat on my face. God it was fucking hot, especially when she did that shaky thing with her thighs! Fuck! I don't know how to make that sound romantic. It felt romantic, but I haven't the words right now.

Sanders picked me up from prison, hectoring me on and on about how my escapades and jury-rigged schemes were thoroughly feckless, reckless and spiteful, him having acquired a thesaurus in the interim while I was imprisoned to more exhaustively categorize the ways I had fallen short of his little Hammurabic code. It made for an awkward carriage ride to the train station, what with the tourist buses still occupied by weeping Ecuadorians.

"This entire trip has been me trying to save you from yourself! In all our time together, you've never once tried to change, or at least put yourself less at risk!" Sanders crossed his arms, right as the horse drawing our carriage forward plopped a stream of grassy dung from out of its sphincter. I felt it was God, illuminating the true meaning of Sanders' point.

"And what about the time I saved your life, just a week ago?" I said.

"Now when did this bloody well happen?"

"Had I ducked, Katya would've killed you! She was the much faster shot." Sanders scoffed and

harrumphed, but he had no words to dispute that. Grief was a mutual friend of ours, but I had never let it define me as it had defined him. He respected death, revered it as a teacher of fables and lessons, which I always thought was obscene. Death teaches nothing, it takes everything and gives nothing but silence, no matter what the agoraphobic poetesses say. Sanders dying would've certainly made sleeping with Katya morally fraught, that's for sure. I still would've done it, the grief and hate might've added something to the moment psychologically, but I put an end to that specific fantasy: Sanders' look of utter disdain made me feel like he could read my mind.

Katya and Pak were there to wave us goodbye, or maybe good riddance, as we boarded the train leaving Samarkand. Katya flashed me a clipped Slavic smile, which said either, "Goodbye, you fool, may we never meet again!" or "Goodbye, my sweet fool, you were a touch of color in my dull, grey life." Perhaps a mix of both. My heart grew forlorn, but like Ulysses' faithful crew begging him to leave the comforts of the witch-goddess Circe, I knew my homecoming served a greater purpose. We rendezvoused with Ronald and Sevi in Aktyubinsk, and Sanders had the good sense to act as if he had seen them for the very first time. I don't think I bothered. I was glad to see Ronald again, he spent approximately one hour mad at

Sevi, until (and I can confirm from the sounds they made rattling the thin walls separating our compartments) she committed some marital acts on that sleeper train that may or may not have been allowed under the current rules of Islamic jurisprudence. There are debates concerning it even. After that hour, their love had grown even stronger. Sanders and I even accompanied Ronald and Sevi as he reunited with his brother Henry. I put in a good word for Sevi, as I'd promised, and Henry—with their mother and father now dead, and the rest of their family pointedly apathetic rather than hostile—promised to give that Uzbek princess a chance; she was delighted to learn that there was one mosque in all of London, in Wandsworth of all places.

But it was in J. Thomas's Pie & Mash where I learned that Sanders was finally dating again. It wasn't thirteen or so years of pure void worship, there were intermittent spots, like that traumatized Swedish woman with the dead sister, or even that brief stint with Ms. Molton, but it was the inklings of something long-term.

"Isobel Cunningham?" I said, digging into my jellied eels with faint disgust. "That sounds eerily like another Isobel Cunningham I knew, a certain Duchess of—"

"Yeah," said Sanders, flatly. "That Duchess. Although, she was only a Duchess by marriage. She's a Dowager Duchess now." Sanders, who was

apparently an expert in nobility. The infamous Duchess of Winchester, the looks of a goddess and the wits of a donkey, as the gutter press had called her. I felt an inkling of guilt over that, but the scandal sheets had elevated my name to the point I could make a living in earnest. I even hired a butler for a spell, although I could scarcely afford him. Poor Thomas, I sometimes see him with Jim now, doing the hanky-panky. I solved the case of the untimely death of her late husband, the Duke of Winchester. He had choked to death on a piece of Sunday roast, and I didn't even need to see the body. I solved it through deduction and contempt alone. The news ran with it, and soon, I became the leaky pervert detective you all knew and loved.

"I'm happy for you, George. Just don't eat anything around her!" I thought Sanders would do that slight, mirthful chuckle he always did when one of my jokes landed, but he just got mad.

"You and all the press laughed at her, but she's a widow! She lost somebody, and she feels tremendous guilt over it. Plenty of people don't notice the signs of choking until it's too late. It may have been a gag for you and for the red-tops, but it was real life for her! She spent years raising awareness with the British Red Cross, she goes around the country. She even saved that boy in Stockton-on-Tees!" I'd never heard that last part, I didn't even know there was a Stockton, much less

a Stockton-on-Tees.

"I'm sorry. I must admit, I was a little cruel towards her. I'm glad you've found somebody to commiserate with. I just hope I don't have to call you Duke." Duke Sanders, sounds like a man who mud wrestles gators in Tuscaloosa.

"I'm not even thinking of that right now," Sanders said, forking bits of mash into his mouth. "And also… the second husband of a Dowager Duchess doesn't become Duke."

We had a lovely lunch, and I bid him farewell as I returned to my house, the one next to Magdalene's begonias. I should've been happy. I was substantially richer. I felt happy knowing I could spend a year now following Fernanda around, until I realized she had already left me. Even Sanders would be gone soon. I had no true friends besides him. Everyone was passing me by. Even Ms. Molton had gotten married, to a man enjoying every second of her fellatrix skills, not caring at all where she had acquired them. My mother died young. My father died old. Everyone I love either leaves me, or I engineer it so they were structurally, constitutionally incapable of ever having stayed. I had a lockbox where I kept all the pictures of my Ming vase lovers, again, I feel like a cad for even thinking in those terms.

I was holding a picture of Katya as she stared out the train window at some rolling dunes, with a twinkle of something in her eye. There was Katya,

with those form-fitting wool trousers and the blue-grey eyes; we were two ships that passed in the night, sharing together a respite from the doldrums of our mutual boredom and my solitary sorrow. There was a tiny dictator inside me, that meager little tyrant I couldn't quite kill, who felt powerful at having used such a formidable woman as a prop to occupy my time, who felt a flicker of pride and contempt that my 'getting away with anything' line had worked on her, but I silenced that covetous little despot. I was no user: even brief flings can have meaning, not for what's in them in the moment, but for the fact that the two people in them are both people, with souls and wants and needs, and just because they could only touch in a sleeper train and a musty prison, doesn't reduce them at all, except perhaps in each other's eyes—but that's a limit of human cognizance! You can give each other your bodies and not much else, but there's still a person there, I'm still a person, perhaps.

I had talked to Sevi about this while our train cut through Leipzig—we'd become good friends by the time we made it to Europe proper—about why I'd grown so fond of Katya only after she'd gone, and she gave me these choice words of wisdom: "Gulnora calls it the rebound that got too real! You catch feelings, even when you tell yourself you won't, and now you feel guilty you're not in a space to handle it, and now you end up fumbling

two good ones in a row! Or maybe more! I didn't want Ronnie to become that, even though I thought my dumbass ex was my world, so I just sank my claws into him, and I've never looked back." It was good to have platonic women friends, it was a marker of maturity according to Sanders, although my skin started to warm when Sevi told me Gulnora and she were twins.

I placed the pictures I had of Katya into that lockbox, I hoped I was a good prop for her. But after that, there was silence. And in that silence, the noise, the hum you hear that no one else does, the hum made by the sound of your own ears wailing as they die.

CHAPTER XI

THEY WERE HAVING a supper and dance at the British Legion Hall in Harrow.

The hall was filled with ex-soldiers, almost all of whom were at the Battle of the Somme, and their wives or sweethearts. I was sat at the club bar for most of it, rather than joining the two dozen or so attendees in the modest hall, although I did raise a toast to absent comrades. Like the sign says, “We Will Remember Them.” My interest only piqued once I heard the sound of an upright piano, played by a certain Roxandra Davies, née Georgescu. Her husband was at that corner stage, singing “It’s a Long Way to Tipperary” in an earnest, slightly off-key way, joined in the chorus by the rest of the modestly drunken revelers. When the evening grew quieter, she played a quiet rendition of “Roses of Picardy” as the men and their loves swayed together informally. At the end, she played, mostly to herself, *La fille aux cheveux*

de lin. Her husband had left early, as planned, right after Tipperary, as he was planning a three-man boating holiday on the Thames with his old war buddies in the East Surreys, and they wanted an early start. A dog was involved, I had heard.

I greeted Roxandra as she left the hall, accompanied by another couple. She looked startled at first, but she broke into a soft, polite smile, and said with genuine sweetness, “Mr. Cook? After all these years?”

I spoke, “Your playing was radiant as always, Roxy.” As if by instinct, she did that thing I’d always begged her to do, presenting her hand, and I kissed the air around her fingers as one would for a lady of standing.

The couple was taken slightly aback by the nickname, and the somewhat out-of-place gesture, but their nerves calmed when she said, “This is John Cook, an old piano student of mine! I knew him as a child.” A child? I was a young man by then, but I understood why she would use the term.

The man, let’s call him Nosy, asked me, “A student? You look almost the same age!” He said it partly to suss out any impropriety and partly as a compliment, although to me it was God’s honest truth. She looked a touch younger than me even, since I’d been aged slightly by foreign suns and poor sunscreen. You couldn’t see the six- or seven-year difference at all.

“Yes, I was a student of Ms. Georgescu’s—I truly apologize, if I may, your name now?” I said this as if I didn’t already know.

“Davies. Mrs. Davies. Married to Joseph.” I had just saved a Joseph some months prior. Or his decoy.

Nosy butted in, “Joseph, now that’s a decent man, gave your poor child a name. A man beyond honor.” Nosy’s wife elbowed him slightly, as Roxy’s gaze turned towards the ground. “And a good singer! An excellent singer. When did you meet Mrs. Davies?”

“I was fifteen,” I said.

“Fourteen,” she corrected.

“Technically, but I was fifteen by the time we…” and I didn’t skip a beat, despite the seeming pause in my thoughts, “… went through how to play my Aeolian scales.” Nosy nodded in total befuddlement.

“How long did you two know each other?” said Nosy.

Roxy answered before I could, “Half a year only.” My memory was skewed, I thought it was half that time. Half a year I’d known her? That felt nice, substantial.

“How old are you now?” said Nosy, befitting the name I’d just given him.

“Thirty-three? Thirty-four?” I did the calculations. “Thirty-three and a smidge! But it feels like I’ve lived ten lifetimes.”

“I haven’t seen you around Harrow, where do you work?” Nosy’s wife was ready to elbow him again.

“I work in London, investigating... insurance fraud, mostly.” Nosy paused a bit.

“Ah, yes, good, clean, honest work. Someone has to do it!” We shared a slight laugh. I knew Nosy’s type, if you asked him his work or his age, he would spiral off into a two-hour soliloquy about his entire life, and I would have no time alone with Roxy to perform my investigation. The one about my father, and her crying all those years ago. It was an overdue case.

“I could accompany Mrs. Davies home, if she feels it’s fine?” I looked at Roxy, and I could sense a slight hesitance before she nodded curtly.

Nosy mulled it over. “Absolutely! A pupil and his old tutor catching up. How innocent!” He and his wife left in their Morris car, and once the doors were closed, you could see Mrs. Nosy’s face turn stern and her lips move, as if to point with precision everywhere Mr. Nosy had breached good manners and sense.

Roxy and I took the bus, and stopped ten minutes from her home. We passed by a few blocks of terraced houses, somewhat stodgy but clean, a step above my place in Enfield. She was wearing a striped blue mid-calf dress with a kick pleat in the center, and a floral chiffon blouse. I imagined when I met her again she would look

like an old crone, but the years had been kind. There were a few delicate wrinkles on her face, the lines on her forehead were somewhat deeper from her smiles, and there was an increased angularity to her nose, but in all the ways that mattered, she was there, right there! Still my Roxy, the one who sat by me at the piano bench and smiled. She still had the fullness of her eyebrows, those soft, thin lips, the piercing dread of her dark eyes, her gaze like velvet over steel, and the light olive tone of her skin. Her hair was still on the darker side, which in retrospect is a pretty good tell for the type of girl who'd wrench my soul, the way a stamping press does to a steelworker's arm. She didn't look like an older woman, but a young woman who grew a little older. There's a difference if you've ever seen it.

"Did you want to hold my hand, Mr. Cook?"

"It seems proper, the moon is out."

I stopped just at the gate to her home. I said, rather sheepishly, "If you permit me, I want to talk about something from the past."

She opened the door to her home. "You're not a vampire, are you? Come in," she said. I went inside. It was furnished in a tasteful, middle-class style, although the wallpaper seemed newer, and the carpet reminded me vaguely of the suzani patterns I had just seen in my little trip to Uzbekistan. On the side table next to the loveseat was a newspaper, next to a clean ashtray:

“DETECTIVE SAVES ROOSKIE DICTATOR: ‘NOT A COMMIE, JUST SEEMED PROPER’” She went upstairs to the master bedroom. Instinctively, I followed her up, but she stopped me right at the threshold of the door, saying with a knowing smile, “Downstairs, Mr. Cook.” She kept the door slightly ajar, and I could see her in her stockings, the suspenders, the silk camisole. It brought me back to my bashful voyeur days, before I became such a Don Juan, before the sight of a woman’s nakedness became as routine to me as seeing the boughs of an elm tree. Or any kind of tree, really. I looked away just as I saw Roxy’s head turn, and with the furtiveness of a courtesan, I made my way downstairs. I think I blushed even. I felt young again.

Roxy descended the steps, wearing an unclosed nightgown over a silk nightdress. “Keeping tabs on me?” I said, pointing to the paper.

“I heard rumors you were a detective, but a famous one? I couldn’t be prouder,” she said. My heart melted just a touch.

In the parlour was an elegant upright, a Steinway Model K. On the lid were a few framed pictures: Roxy, more or less as I’d known her in my boyish days, although a little sterner in the face, Joseph with his rowing crew, and a newer picture of a girl in her late teens. She looked prim, but with a roguish streak and a cheekiness to her smile that I’m sure has utterly devastated a string

of soulful young Werthers, and completely macerated their hearts into pulp. I felt a strange sense of pride.

"That's Jane. My daughter," Roxy said. "She's up at Somerville. Even with all the scholarships, she's a total money sink, and a complete troublemaker. I live for the weekends when she can visit."

"She must get that from her father," I said. "What with all his singing."

Roxy paused, "Yes. It's the singing, turns your children into rogues."

I looked at her more seriously now. "I have to talk to you about what happened with my father. I am sorry, truly, if this stirs up something painful in you, but I wouldn't have asked at all if it weren't important to me."

Roxy looked away, looked at the ground, stared at the picture of Jane. We sat at the longer couch across from the fireplace. The big light was off, and she was wearing her gown so loosely I could see the curves of her under that rayon nightdress. She was this lithe, graceful thing in my youth, and age had added the sweetness of some curves to her frame. I tried pushing those thoughts from my head. I breathed deeply, and focused only on the world of the rational. I came here to learn the truth.

Roxy started, "When your father found out, he got mad." Already, I was lost. He had never talked

to me about what Roxy and I had done together, hadn't even mentioned it, save for an obtuse reference a few weeks later where he had said, "Welp, I guess you're a man now."

I'm not sure why he would've gotten mad, it seemed a strange thing to even be upset over, but I continued, "How did he find out?"

Roxy sat with her feet on the cushions, looking at her own nails rather than at me. "The sheets were a mess," she said softly. I'd do the washing at home when my father couldn't hire help. I think I'd gotten careless, and forgot to hide the used sheets. I would've gone home earlier that Saturday, which I usually did on account of Roxy, but I'd just gotten detention for smacking another boy who said my shirt stank of musty old cobwebs.

"What happened after?"

"He started to pull and push me around, hitting me with the palms of his hands." I felt horrified. This wasn't the father I knew, there was a small part of me that wanted to defend his honor, but seeing Roxy driven to the point of tears, I stopped. I don't know if I could ever hate him, but I could throw my boyish dream of my father's impregnable honor into the bonfire. It was the mature thing to do.

Roxy continued, her eyes now wet, "He called me a whore, said 'You're a piano teacher, that's not what I pay you for!' He kept pushing me,

pulling me, grabbing at me. Then he pushed me to the ground." I had to steel myself for what she could've said next. I drew closer to her on the couch. "He simply... hovered over me. For maybe thirty seconds? The anger was gone, his face, it was something like hunger. I thought, 'He's just like any other man.'" Her hands were shaking, telling me this. I wanted to cry with her. "He did nothing else. He stood up, told me to leave, and he walked down to the kitchen and just sat at the table, letting his tea get cold."

My father hurt a girl I loved in a vicious way. He hadn't crossed that threshold, but he had done an evil thing, something that I couldn't forgive him for. I felt an anger beyond what I could contain, I didn't know where to put it, but I kept a straight face, and continued my detective work.

"That's when you ran out? That's when I saw you, telling me to go away?"

"Yes. I'm sorry, but I needed to leave. I couldn't stand seeing you after what your father did." And it wasn't until about eighteen years later that I saw her again.

"I should be the one who's sorry. I don't know, I could've done something, I could've..." Roxy laughed bitterly.

"What could you have done?" she said. I had no answer for her. I just had a certainty, more vivid than ever, that I'd let her down. I sat there with this growing and horrible unease. Then Roxy

started to cry, weeping unabashedly. I tried moving closer to her on that couch, but she pushed me away.

"I'm sorry for what I did to you," she said, her words coming out staggered. "I wasn't thinking. It was the only way I had learned to show love. I think I'm worse than your father." I felt horrified at what she'd said. I wept for her, she had so internalized whatever suffering she had gone through, it made her feel as if she were the same as those who had inflicted it. It had a fancy name in the psychological papers, the ones written by those stuffy Germans. I'd skim them for my detective work, but some of the material was too heady for me. Still, it was a classic case of what I was forty-percent sure was called "false transference", when the pain you feel gets misdirected as the guilt of causing it. It was what that mustachioed Austrian called trauma-induced samskaratic displacement. Maybe. I knew the mechanisms of it, but to see it happen to someone I had loved, it was hard to intellectualize.

As gingerly as I could, I put my arms around her and said, "No, no. What are you talking about? You did nothing to me I didn't want. You didn't hurt me. You pulled me out of the darkness. All my life, I thought I was gross and ugly inside. I thought that I would never amount to anything. But you looked at me, you really saw me, and you knew I was worth something. You chose me, and I

was bursting with happiness the whole time. You didn't hurt me, you taught me how to be a man," and try as I might, I cried too. I leaned closer to her, hoping my pain could somehow ease hers. I didn't know what else to do. I was always the weepy type.

Roxy touched the side of my face, and looked at me with the same kind eyes I had seen above and below me all those years ago. She was older now, she was either near forty or just, but she wore it so well. She wasn't a stranger. She was there. Right there! I felt love, and this gross panic, emerge within me at the same time. And I had this certainty that if I could hold her again, that whatever happened to me wasn't the ridiculous inverted shame she said it was, what some cruel part of me that wants to blame everyone but myself thinks it might've been, but the thing that saved me, the thing that made me capable of love. So I kissed her, and all this lust and fear I felt for her fused together until it became pure again. The sheer panic of being alone that night, the noise, the constant dread of feeling I was broken, it just stopped. I kissed her and kissed her, and she kissed me. Suddenly, she stood up, and backed away. My heart ached, if she made me who I am, if she chose me once before and then stopped choosing me now, I think I would have broken.

But she smiled, and with the grace of a queen, she slipped that nightgown and dress from her,

and threw those frilly knickers of hers on the floor. She smiled, the same way she did when she first asked me to kiss her. And I crawled to her like a dog, slowly, as she stopped in the middle of the room. I got on my knees and I embraced her, feeling the softness of her skin and the faint stretch marks on her stomach. She had lived a whole life without me, and I kissed and licked her stomach so tenderly, and I embraced her around her waist and pressed my head against her abdomen, just sobbing into her as she stood there naked. She tousled my hair, touched my ears, and I felt her wedding ring graze my skin. This felt like something deeper than love, deeper than just connection, it was something primordial, the ein sof of my being, the absence in my soul revealing itself to be something after all. I felt as if I understood her now. Then, she pushed the top of my head with some real force and violence, and I laughed to myself a little as I said, “Sorry, Roxy, let me get on that,” smiling at her from below. That ache which was always mixed with panic, the shudder and the hunger I felt when I remembered her, it stopped when I was with her in the flesh. It transmogrified into something purer, sharper, clearer. It hurt, and it hurt good. She was the one who healed me, and I felt so deep in my bones it was my turn to heal her now, and this was the only way I knew how, so I squeezed the softness of her gorgeous rear as I went and did my work of

public service. The sounds she made, it felt like I was repaying a gift that she had given me. My face was cradled in a warm bristly embrace, the scent of her was like home.

And when I'd made her finish, she walked up the stairs into her bedroom and I kept crawling towards her like a dog on a leash, the lamplight making her look like some kind of angelic paralysis demon as she cooed and called me forward. I had to have her. And all the while, as I yearned for her warmth pressed against mine, I felt this bitterness inside me, an anger with no source. I felt small and frightened and filthy, I felt —however absurdly—that she was the one who had hurt me, that she took me when I was small and clueless about life and smothered me under the weight of all her want, indifferent to what her appetites would do to me or if I could even hold it, I felt that I was deep in the embrace of someone who tore a hole in me, who ripped something out of me I couldn't get back, and worst of all, all of it just made me love her more, it just made me want her more. She saw me, this small, ugly thing and saw my real value, and whatever she did to make me feel it, however she chose to love me, it didn't make me worse, it made me better, and it didn't tear something out of me, but gave me something I would've never gotten without her. But then I realized, she wanted the bitterness. She wanted to feel scared, and small, and used, and I could give

her the safe version of it, the thing she knew would never curdle into actual hurt, but could give her a good enough counterfeit to really get her engine running. Maybe it was me reflecting in myself what she wanted done to her. So she guided my hand to her neck, and I did that thing where you don't actually hurt a woman's windpipe, but just apply some pressure to the side. I read it in a gutter rag in Oxford Circus Station, it was very safe, so long as you didn't go overboard —don't squeeze harder than you'd squeeze your own nuts! And she flashed me this carnivorous look in her eyes, a lustful sneer to her lovely lips, a kind of animalistic wanting and hate all at once, and it was a side I hadn't seen from her before, and she was saying something foreign in this prayerful way, and she said it faster and higher, which sent me deeper and deeper into these choleric paroxysms of pure, raw feeling. She was whispering right into my ear, and it was like every cell in my body had ruptured from sheer pleasure. A grim thought came to me right as I was deep inside her, right as my face hovered above hers, right as I saw a brief flash of terror in her eyes even as she goaded me on and on, "I'm using her like she used me. She can't hurt me anymore," and I thought it was another one of those psychic reflections you get when you connect with someone so close your thoughts blend into one another, and I used it to fuel my aggression, the

aggression she needed from me to heal, just as I was healing a part of me I didn't know was broken. It was like touching a third rail, the knowledge that I could do it right this time. And right before I erupted, right as I had consumed her fully and she me, I imagined that she was the imperious, tempestuous monster hovering over me, and I was the scared, tiny frightened thing who didn't know if she'd cross the threshold and destroy me forever, and it was the loudest, brightest, most erotic sensation I had ever felt, as if every nerve in my body was raw and firing with the radiance of a million exploding stars.

I felt the hum in my brain vanish, finally. My frayed nerves settled into the deepest, most relaxing calm. It was the first time I had felt whole since being with Fernanda. I'd been circling the whole globe, when what I really needed was her to remind me there was good in me. She chose me all those years ago because she saw it. She was how I first learned what love is, and how to love. She was so patient with me when I learned how to kiss. In the afterglow, listening to the tick of the grandfather clock, staring at a picture of Mr. Davies on the nightstand holding a sizeable freshwater pike, after emptying all that I had and all that I was into her, I laid my head on her soft, heaving breasts, and I asked her to tell me I was enough.

"Mr. Cook, all these years later, and you're still

the boy I knew." She kissed me on my forehead and nose. She was my Roxy again. It was the perfect kind of contrast, the white-hot lust of that moment settling into real tenderness. She was stroking my hair the way I liked. I felt at peace.

"Roxy, can you sing for me?" She laughed a little bit, remembering the time I asked her the same question all those years ago.

"That was a lullaby for babies, you're too old for that."

"Maybe you have a song for someone like me?" I was nearly asleep, but a part of me needed her voice now.

She thought for a little bit. "There was this song from a musical my husband and I liked, I heard it on the radio just yesterday, you might like it too. It's very mature, not for babies at all."

"Mmm, yeah," I kept myself awake, just to hear her voice.

Roxy cleared her throat theatrically, and sang: "There's a saying old, says that love is blind..." I drifted to sleep as I listened to her sing, in that voice of hers which told me I would be watched over, and wanted, and loved.

CHAPTER XII

I AWOKE TO the smell of toasted bread, and the sound of a wedding march by Grieg on the upright.

Even from upstairs, I could hear her hammering those keys. I knew by now my father's advice about eyes and ears was a bit uncouth and caddish, but a woman's playing centered me in a way nothing else did, a gasba, a guitar, now an upright piano. The way a woman could sing a song to a crowded taberna, and with that same instrument vocalize in breathy, rising pleas to an audience of one, the same woman! How effortlessly they drifted from that public world to the private one, whereas men were brutes about it, their guns always loaded and only scarcely hidden. If only women ruled the world!

My clothes were still in a dainty heap on the floor. I felt clean. I came downstairs, and just as that wedding day piece ended, she said in a voice

so dulcet, “There’s my little prince!” I’m sure she meant it in the chivalric sense.

I was as relaxed and noodly as a spineless cat, the scouring of our lovemaking had cleared the cobwebs of my soul, the putrid leaves from my rain gutters. I didn’t know if ‘lover’ was the right word for Roxy, I didn’t know what to call a woman who could make you feel small and tall all in one look, a woman who could stroke your hair and kiss your cheek and make you feel like the world was a trifle compared to her unconditional love. I wouldn’t mindlessly foist the weight of my tenderness upon her like some common tramp (who I still respect, don’t get me wrong), but I knew I had someone special: I loved her, and she loved me. When I needed my soul, or hers, redeemed, we would find each other again. Or hell, if she just wanted another life-changing romp, just call my name, I’ll come running back to you, hot mama!

She had made wheat toast with a spicy spread called zacuscă that she’d canned and kept in the icebox. I scoffed it all down, despite the protestations of my Anglican pyloric valve. We caught up on life, sitting in her breakfast table. I told her about my latest Uzbek escapade, about how I’d mended fences with my best friend Sanders, even confided to her about the anguish I’d felt for losing Fernanda, whose name she recognized. She needled me, in that adorable

Semi-Balkan-adjacent way, for having fumbled a woman with so much refinement and grace, then she said, “If you could capture her heart, even for just a year, what are you doing with a wretch like me?” and I had to stop and tell her that yes, Fernanda was the love of my life, but she was something else I cannot name, something the word love, even that infinite word, couldn’t quite hold.

Then, we both heard the turning of the front door knob and the jangling of keys, and the life drained from her face. She must’ve forgotten the deadbolt—my precious Roxy, still new to trysts! Naturally, I’d been in this exact scenario before, and I rolled up my sleeves and threw my overcoat under the sink cabinet. I expected to see Joseph, who I respected as a decent man and provider; it was only fair that if I ever made those vows of matrimony too, he could bed my hypothetical wife if both of them so wished. I stuffed as much of my upper body as I could inside the sink cabinet, tapping on the plumbing.

The door opened. It was Jane. The sprightly young girl from the photo. Roxy was by the door. “Bună, mami,” Jane said, in a warm deadpan. Roxy kissed her on the cheek.

“Fata mea! What are you doing here? Why didn’t you call ahead?”

“I forgot, I’m sorry mami. The coursework has scrambled my brain.” She looked at me, my legs dangling from the sink cabinet.

“The plumber!” said Roxy.

“Fancy pants for a plumber,” Jane said.

I emerged from the sink cabinet. I saw Jane, with her precious bucktoothed smile. She had the faintest of overbites, and I knew then and there that I’d want nothing from her but to know she was safe. I froze, I didn’t know what was welling up inside me, I quite literally didn’t know, but it rhymed very well with the histrionic self-hatred I’d been flagellating myself with ever since my heart broke.

I did my best accent, hoping it was Russian or Polish. “It’s the rice, madam. Too much rice down the sink, it coagulates and turns into a type of cement! I have removed the offending clog, but you must surely keep rice away from the pipes, in future.”

Roxy said, “Yes, Mr. Plumber, I apologize for forgetting your name, the pipes upstairs? Check them. Now.” And I obeyed.

Jane seemed to take my cover story plainly, and Roxy doted upon her, even as Jane feigned a sort of cool disinterest. Even upstairs, my sensitive ears could catch the bulk of their conversation, how Jane was buried in a gauntlet of Philosophy, Politics and Economics coursework, which she found dreadful due to the boredom of its tedium, rather than any difficulty with the material. I felt the exact same about my Year 6 classes. Then she started talking about the college boys, the would-

be suitors. The boy from Balliol, the consummate Marxist, who kept trying to end each conversation as the verbal superior, despite how much she would wound his ego, which only made him seethe and ply his machinations again. The boy from St. John's, and for this one, Jane spoke with a hushed regret: he was the sheepish sort who nevertheless persisted, and her last rejection was so severe, he had fallen almost deathly ill; he even missed one or two lectures. "Mami, did I hurt him?" and Roxy assuaged her, saying she had no business carrying guilt from the fragility of college dorks.

Eventually, she had to leave. The rigors of her academic life made each visit brief, and this one was briefer than most. As soon as she left, I made my way downstairs.

I was in awe of Jane, but it wasn't the regular awe I could turn into my usual composed praise. I felt that same violent coring inside, and I felt the deepest, most intense shame, for having abandoned Roxy, for having abandoned Jane. Reader, do you think I was that foolish, not to see? I may be a buffoon, but I can do arithmetic, especially if I can use all ten of my fingers. I think I knew who she was to me as soon as I laid my eyes on her picture. But there's a difference between the knowing and the seeing. And seeing her, I can't put into words what I felt. The hum was coming back again, the radio static. I knew I

was a leaver, although I'd perfected it so that girls could see my inherent flaws early and leave of their own accord, frictionlessly. But I didn't know the extent of it, the sheer size of my moral turpitude.

"I don't know what to say," I said, tears in my eyes. I thought all I'd amount to was a half-dozen mentions in a couple worthless news rags, more suited for lining bird cages than informing, but a girl, a baby girl? Like the one my mother wished she had? "I love her."

Roxy faced me, and her expression turned cold and cruel. It was rare, but I knew it right away. The tempestuousness, I deserved it for saying something so stupidly forward. "You may be her father, but she is not yours."

That stung me deeply, but I knew in my heart that she was right. I had no part in her life before. I knew nothing about being a father. I didn't even know what to tell Jane, don't do yoga, stick to karate? "I understand—"

"No, you don't. I know you mean well. I know you would never hurt her. But if you approach her. If you tell her who you are. If you tell her..." and the cruelty of her face broke into pain, "If you tell her what I did, you will never see me again. I will kill you, before you tell her."

And the shock of those words chilled me. I needed her. She was the only one who could truly make me clean. I wouldn't argue with her, not

now. “Yes, Roxy. I’ll do it. I’ll stay away.” Perhaps it was true what the Vedic sages said in the Upanishads, that God punishes the coldest players and the foulest heartbreakers by giving them daughters.

Her face turned lighter. “I’m new to your world, Mr. Cook. We can’t meet in the house anymore, how do we do it?”

It was trivial, she was a real talent. There were always places, events around London, looking for pianists. “You do performances?”

“Yes, sometimes with my husband, much more now that the house is empty.”

“You can read sheet music, play stride piano, lead sheets, pick up changes by ear?” I threw out a bunch of random terminology I’d heard Sanders say, to see if it’d throw her off.

“I can read music, yes. I can manage those new tunes okay, but I’m classically trained at heart, I’m no Fats Waller. I’m Romanian, we don’t make good jazz cats!” Another shock, I thought she was Moldovan.

“We won’t even need an alibi. You already perform around London. You tell me when and where, and I’ll pick you up. If anything, I know how to be discreet.” Roxy thought it over. She nodded.

She held my hand as she said, “I’m sorry about Jane, but it has to be this way. She needs the mother she’s always known.” I had no clue what

she meant by that. How could Jane not love the woman I knew fully? She looked at me with those piercing eyes. “I’m just glad you’re here again, I’m glad I can love you the way I know best. For the longest time, I thought that I had broken you.” She looked so happy.

I kissed her with a passion I’d know she’d miss, and I bid her farewell, counting the days until our next soul-cleansing tryst, and knowing the weight of all I’d have to absorb, I elected to walk all the way to Enfield from Harrow. It’d give me five, perhaps six, hours to ruminate. I passed more terraced houses, heard the shouting of drivers as they nearly swiped me. I survived maybe two or three dimwitted cyclists, using the bike lanes as exercise instead of transport. I passed a few cottages and walked through green forest paths and the grass besides some smaller roadways, a few lined with dead weasels struck by the tires of careless motorists. I even passed a few moss-covered stone walls, lining those verdant English fields with the cows the Hindus thought sacred, and the British thought winsome. Would these cows weep to the sound of Tárrega, as I had? I even passed Mrs. Dorsey, née Molton, who almost spat at my feet were it not for her husband. I remember bedding her with such relish, leaving a trail of kisses from her toes up to her hair, but I made it clear in the daytime we were but two souls drifting into each other, passing the time

together with honest, clean sex. Finally, I made it back to my place, thrilled that I had a few new pictures of my Roxy to add to the lockbox. I'm sure, in a few years time, after I had softened Roxy with my Dionysian ministrations, she would reconsider her prohibition, and I could talk to Jane truly, one peerless mind to another, and I could fend off scoundrels with my double-barreled shotgun, as she pursued her stuffy Oxbridge vocation. Perhaps I could even soften Mr. Davies' heart, once I explained to him the full intricacies of this newfangled concept they were concocting in Switzerland, called the "mixed family." I don't know how long the noise would be stayed, but knowing I had someone who loved me—that I had a daughter with her! An honest to God family!—it eased the darkness of my private thoughts, even just a trifle.